

MARK SCHEME for the October/November 2007 question paper

9699 SOCIOLOGY

9699/02

Paper 2 (Data Response), maximum raw mark 50

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All Examiners are instructed that alternative correct answers and unexpected approaches in candidates' scripts must be given marks that fairly reflect the relevant knowledge and skills demonstrated.

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

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1 Sociologists are divided about whether the methods and techniques used in the natural sciences can be applied in sociological research. Sociologists in the positivist tradition support the scientific approach. Through their research they seek to discover ‘scientific laws’, which could explain the causes, functions and consequences of social phenomena, such as rates of crime and suicide. In contrast, sociologists who support the interpretivist perspective maintain that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and the social sciences. This perspective derives from the work of Max Weber. He rejected the idea that people can be studied in the same manner as the physical world. People attach meanings to what they do and sociology has to acknowledge this and attempt to interpret those meanings. However, this raises the question of whether sociologists are able to interpret other people’s behaviour in a way that is objective and value-free. Positivists warn that in-depth studies that focus on understanding the meanings people attach to their behaviour give rise to many difficulties. They are also likely to be contaminated by researcher bias to such an extent as to make the results totally unreliable.

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

Researcher bias refers to the distortion of the research process and/or results that is due to the influence, consciously or otherwise, of those carrying out the research. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition, one mark for a partial definition.

(b) Describe *two* problems that a sociologist may face in seeking to interpret objectively the actions of other people. [4]

Many potential problems, including the presuppositions of the observer, the possibility that the people being observed may deliberately mislead the observer (Hawthorne effect), the inherently ambiguous nature of many social actions, and the difficulty in some cases of obtaining adequate access to the individuals or groups concerned. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 x 2 marks).

(c) Explain why some sociologists think that people cannot be studied in the same manner as the physical world. [8]

0–4 Answers based on a few vague assertions about the differences between people and physical nature would fit the lower half of the band. A better answer at this level might contain one or two simple points that demonstrating knowledge of the interpretivist perspective in relation to the question.

5–8 At this level there will be a clear attempt to explain why some sociologists think that people cannot be studied in the same manner as the physical world. An answer that explains the significance of the emphasis on meaning in the interpretivist perspective in relation to the question would merit 5 or 6 marks. A more expanded version of this type of answer, perhaps including references to the issue of free will and/or the difficulty of studying people using experiments and other methods associated with the natural sciences, would certainly be worth a mark at the top of the band.

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(d) **'The differences between the logic and methods of the natural sciences and sociology have been exaggerated by the critics of positivism.'** Assess this view. [11]

0–4 Answers at this level may be confined to a few vague remarks on the theme of 'sociology as a science'. There may be little or no direct reference to the logic and methods of the natural sciences. At the top of the band, a very limited awareness of the anti-positivist position may be demonstrated.

5–8 Lower in the band the answer may be somewhat indirect in providing a sound descriptive account of the positivist versus interpretivist perspectives in sociology. To go higher though the candidates must respond to the question as set. Knowledge of the logic and methods of the natural sciences will be demonstrated and an attempt will be made to explain why the differences with sociology may not be as great as suggested by the critics of positivism.

9–11 At this level a definite attempt will be made to assess the view expressed in the question. This may take the form of a defence of either the positivist or the interpretivist perspective. It might also raise issues about the nature of scientific method (Kuhn, the realists, Feyerabend, etc). Strong analytical responses that develop plausible lines of argument in response to the question would trigger the top of the band.

2 Unstructured interviews more resemble conversations than the systematic interview schedules of structured interviews. The purpose of unstructured interviews is to gain an in-depth understanding of an interviewer's perception of particular subjects or issues. One advantage is that they can be used flexibly to explore issues at a range of levels. The interview usually takes place between two people, though group interviews can also be used to gain insight into the collective view. Sociologists from the interactionist perspective favour unstructured interviews.

Unstructured interviews allow respondents to feel empowered. Feminists view this as particularly important. They are critical of research methods that are too formal. Feminists prefer respondents to be active participants in the research process and they believe that researcher knowledge and skill should not dominate interviews. For example, Kelly in her study of sexual violence wanted to ensure that all the women she spoke to had some involvement in addition to answering the interviewer's questions. She carried out follow-up interviews in which she discussed the themes and analysis that she was developing, asking for and noting the women's opinions. This enabled 'joint interpretation of meaning', allowing the women to have an input into the findings.

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

A structured interview is an interview based on pre-set questions that are asked in the same order every time. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition, one mark for a partial definition.

(b) **Describe *two* advantages of group interviews.** [4]

Advantages of group interviews include: responses may be stimulated by the group dynamic; interaction between group members can be observed and recorded; other group members may help clarify and/or expand the answers given by particular individuals; it may save time and money interviewing each group member separately. One mark for the advantage plus one mark for development (2 x 2 marks).

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(c) Explain why feminists are critical of research methods that are too formal. [8]

- 0–4 A few assertions about the possible problems with research methods (questionnaires, structured interviews) that are too formal might merit 1 or 2 marks. To go higher, there has to be some discernible link with the feminist perspective, albeit that the answer at this level will remain limited in the extent to which it addresses the issues raised by the question.
- 5–8 Lower in the band there will be a basic attempt to explain why feminists are critical of research methods that are too formal and hierarchical. The answer may rely primarily on a re-working and extension of the material in the source. At the top of the band, the explanation will be detailed and sustained; it will demonstrate a good understanding of the feminist perspective on research methods. References to appropriate studies should be rewarded appropriately, though they are not essential to reach the top of the band.

(d) Assess the strengths and limitations of unstructured interviews. [11]

- 0–4 An answer that focuses only on interviews in general could, if reasonably well done, achieve 4 marks. A few simple observations about unstructured interviews with little or no attempt to assess the strengths and limitations of that research method might be worth 3 or 4 marks.
- 5–8 At this level the focus will be on unstructured interviews specifically. An answer that identifies a few strengths and/or limitations with little development or range of knowledge might be worth 5 or 6 marks. To go higher, a wider range of strengths and limitations needs to be identified, although the response may still be somewhat list-like and the assessment rather pedestrian.
- 9–11 Answers that merit this band will provide a sustained account of the strengths and limitations of unstructured interviews. Both practical and theoretical issues will be addressed. Examples from studies may be used to illustrate key points, though this is not essential to attain full marks. At the top of the band, the assessment will be incisive and may attempt to draw together an overall conclusion about the usefulness of unstructured interviews in sociological research.

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- 3 It is generally agreed that the rate of social mobility is significantly higher in modern industrial societies than in traditional societies. Industrial societies are therefore sometimes described as 'open'. They may also be characterised as meritocratic. A meritocracy is a system in which people are rewarded on the basis of how hard they work and how much ability they possess. However, there is a debate in sociology about whether modern industrial societies are meritocratic. Conflict theorists claim that inequality remains a key feature of these societies. In this view, the idea that an 'open' system exists in which people are free to realise their potential regardless of social background is an illusion

Evidence from social mobility studies is important in the debate about meritocracy. This is because a study of social mobility can provide an indication of the life chances of members of society. For example, it can show the degree to which a person's class of origin influences his or her chances of obtaining a high status occupation. The rate of social mobility may also have an important effect on class formation. For example, if the rate of social mobility is low, then class solidarity and cohesion are likely to be high. However, there are many problems associated with the study of social mobility.

- (a) What is meant by the term *life chances*? [2]

Life chances refer to the outcomes of the distribution of power in society that determine the opportunity to realise an individual's goals. It includes chances for educational attainment, health, material reward, and social mobility. Two marks for a clear and accurate definition, one mark for a partial definition.

- (b) Describe *two* problems in measuring social mobility. [4]

Problems in measuring social mobility include, for example, researchers use different criteria for ranking occupations, it is difficult to identify many people in terms of occupations (e.g. the rich, unemployed, retired, etc.), the findings of studies can be expressed in different ways and there is controversy about the use of absolute versus relative measures of social mobility. One mark for the example plus one mark for development (2 x 2 marks).

- (c) Explain why the rate of social mobility may have an important effect on class formation. [8]

0–4 A few general observations about the nature of social mobility with no link to the topic of class formation may be worth 1 or 2 marks. A few simple assertions about the relationship between social mobility and class formation, with little or no identifiable sociological backing, could merit a mark in the top half of the band.

5–8 Answers that fit the lower part of the band will contain a basic account of how the rate of social mobility may influence the formation of social classes. For example, low levels of upward social mobility may facilitate the development of class cultures and a heightened awareness among the subordinate groups of inequality and the difficulty of breaking through class barriers. At the top of the band, the explanation of the links between social mobility and class formation will be detailed and well informed. References to relevant studies are not essential to gain full marks, but they could help support the answer. For example, the classic Affluent Worker study illustrates well the link between a minor degree of upward social mobility and the corresponding fragmentation of traditional class attitudes.

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(d) Assess the claim that there are no longer any social barriers to upward social mobility in modern industrial societies. [11]

0–4 Answers at this level are likely to be based on assertion rather than appropriate sociological arguments and evidence. A response of this kind that is at least focused on the issue of whether social barriers to upward social mobility still exist, might be worth 3 or 4 marks.

5–8 Up to 6 marks may be awarded for a basic account of the meritocracy thesis with no further development or assessment. Alternatively, a simple description of some of the barriers to upward social mobility that, it can be argued, continue to be a feature of modern industrial societies could also be worth up to 6 marks. A better answer at this level may demonstrate awareness of both sides of the argument and this may be achieved, for example, by contrasting the meritocracy thesis with a conflict perspective (feminist, Marxist, etc). Even at the top of the band though the answer may still be largely descriptive.

9–11 Answers at this level will demonstrate a good understanding of the claim that there are no longer any social barriers to upward social mobility. This claim will be subjected to a sustained assessment and an attempt will be made to outline the opposite view, whether through references to appropriate theoretical perspectives (feminist, Marxist) and/or by use of relevant sociological arguments and evidence. At the top of the band the assessment will be explicit, detailed and incisive.