

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

Sociology Optional Sociology as Science

Paper 1 · Unit 2

The unit that decides whether sociology can be a science at all: positivism from Comte to Durkheim, Weber's Verstehen, the fact/value problem from Weber to Gouldner and Myrdal, and the three non-positivist strands that treat meaning rather than causality as the object.

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(a) Science, scientific method and critique. (b) Major theoretical strands of research methodology. (c) Positivism and its critique. (d) Fact value and objectivity. (e) Non-positivist methodologies.

What Science Is, and the Test Sociology Has to Pass

Before arguing whether sociology is a science, fix what science means. Almost every weak answer to 'Is sociology a science?' fails because it never states the criteria it is applying, and so its verdict is unearned. State the postulates, apply them one by one, then judge.

- The classical postulates of scientific method: empiricism (knowledge grounded in sense observation), objectivity (findings independent of the observer's wishes), systematic observation under controlled conditions, the search for causal relations, generalisation into theory, verifiability and replicability by others, predictive capacity, and cumulative growth.
- Apply them honestly, because 'critically examine' rewards the concessions. Where sociology qualifies: it is empirical, it uses systematic and public methods, it generalises, it builds theory, its findings are open to peer scrutiny and revision. Durkheim's *Suicide* is the standing proof that a social phenomenon can be measured, correlated, and explained by rival hypotheses eliminated one by one.
- Where sociology struggles: experiment is rarely possible and never fully controlled, because you cannot randomly assign people to castes; its subject matter has consciousness and reacts to being studied; prediction is probabilistic at best; complete objectivity is compromised because the observer is inside the object; and there is no single agreed paradigm.
- Karl Popper's demarcation criterion, from *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934, English 1959), reframes the whole debate and is the highest-value point available: what makes a statement scientific is not that it can be verified but that it can be falsified. Popper used the criterion to expel Marxism and psychoanalysis from science, on the ground that they explain every possible outcome and forbid nothing. The lesson for sociology: a theory that cannot fail is not thereby strong, it is empty. Comte's Law of Three Stages fails this test.
- Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) demolishes the premise of the question from the other side. If natural science itself proceeds not by neutral accumulation but through paradigms, normal science, anomalies and revolutions, and if paradigm choice is not settled by evidence alone, then holding sociology to a mythical picture of natural science is unfair. Kuhn regarded the social sciences as pre-paradigmatic.
- George Ritzer's response: sociology is not pre-paradigmatic but a multiple paradigm science, with the social facts paradigm (Durkheim, structural functionalism, conflict theory), the social definition paradigm (Weber, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology) and the social behaviour paradigm (Skinner, exchange theory). Robert Friedrichs' *A Sociology of Sociology* (1970) made a parallel argument. The exam-useful line: sociology's multi-paradigm condition is a feature of studying meaningful action, not a stage of adolescence it will grow out of.
- The defensible verdict, and the one to actually write: sociology is a science in method, in that it is systematic, empirical, public and self-correcting, but not in the Newtonian sense of yielding universal predictive laws. It is best understood as a science with a distinct object, meaningful human action, which imposes methods natural science does not need, in particular interpretation. Refusing to answer, or claiming full parity with physics, both lose marks.

- The 2018 question's angle, whether scientific method makes sociology a science with reference to Durkheim's method, wants the specific machinery: treat social facts as things, eradicate preconceptions, define phenomena by external characteristics before explaining them, distinguish normal from pathological, and use concomitant variation as the substitute for experiment, since sociology cannot manipulate its variables.

KEY TERMS

Falsifiability — Popper's criterion of demarcation: a statement is scientific only if it forbids some observable state of affairs and could in principle be refuted.

Paradigm — Kuhn's term for the shared exemplars, assumptions and methods that define normal science for a community of practitioners.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What is science? Do you think that the methods used in natural sciences can be applied to sociology? Give reasons for your answer. [2025]
- What are the characteristics of scientific method? Do you think that scientific method in conducting sociological research is foolproof? Elaborate. [2023]
- Does scientific method make Sociology a science? Illustrate your answer with Durkheim's method. [2018]
- Describe the basic postulates of Scientific method. How far are these followed in sociological research? [2016]
- Is Sociology a science? Give reasons for your answer. [2015]

Positivism: Comte's Programme, Durkheim's Execution

Positivism is not one thing, and answers improve immediately if you separate its layers. It is an epistemology (only observable facts yield knowledge), a methodology (the unity of scientific method across nature and society), and in Comte's hands a philosophy of history. Comte announced it. Durkheim was the one who actually did it.

- Comte's positivism, in *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830 to 1842): abandon the search for first and final causes, which belong to the theological and metaphysical stages, and confine science to discovering invariant laws of succession and resemblance among observable phenomena. Knowledge is for prediction and control: 'savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir', to know in order to predict, to predict in order to control.
- Positivism's core tenets, as they operate in sociology: naturalism (the unity of method across natural and social science), empiricism (only what is observable counts as evidence), phenomenalism (reject unobservable essences), the search for causal laws and general regularities, quantification, and the separation of facts from values.
- Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895) converts the programme into procedure. The cardinal rule: consider social facts as things (*considérer les faits sociaux comme des choses*). This is a methodological instruction, not a metaphysics: treat social facts as you would treat objects you do not already understand, from outside, by their observable properties, rather than by introspecting on what you assume they mean.
- Social facts are defined by three properties, and getting them right is worth easy marks: they are external to the individual, they exercise constraint over the individual (visible when you resist them and sanctions appear), and they are general throughout the society while existing independently of any individual's manifestation of them. They are *sui generis*, of their own kind, not reducible to psychology or biology.
- The corollaries: eradicate all preconceptions before inquiry; define the phenomenon by external and objective characteristics before explaining it; and explain a social fact by antecedent social facts, distinguishing

efficient cause from function, which are two different questions and must not be confused.

- Because experiment is unavailable to sociology, Durkheim adopted the comparative method, and within it concomitant variation, taken from J.S. Mill's canons, as the sociologist's substitute. If two phenomena vary together systematically across many cases, and the correlation is not spurious, a causal relation is indicated.
- Suicide (1897) is the demonstration piece and is worth reconstructing as a method, not as a set of types. Durkheim took the most private act imaginable, established that suicide rates are stable and patterned, eliminated the extra-social explanations one by one (heredity, race, climate, cosmic factors, psychopathic states, imitation), and then showed the rate varying with two social currents: integration and regulation. Protestants exceeded Catholics, the unmarried exceeded the married, the childless exceeded parents, and rates fell during war and political crisis.
- The four types follow from the two variables: egoistic (deficient integration), altruistic (excessive integration), anomic (deficient regulation) and fatalistic (excessive regulation, which Durkheim mentioned only in a footnote and of which he thought the slave the type case).
- Why Suicide matters methodologically, which is the point the exam wants: it proved that a social fact can be measured, that rates behave lawfully even when individual acts do not, and that sociology can explain what psychology claims as its own. It is the founding demonstration that the discipline is possible.

KEY TERMS

Social fact — Durkheim's term for a way of acting, thinking or feeling that is external to the individual, endowed with a power of constraint, and general throughout a society.

Concomitant variation — The comparative procedure, drawn from Mill's canons, of inferring causation from the systematic co-variation of two phenomena across cases; Durkheim's substitute for the experiment.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Critically examine positivistic approach in sociology studies. [2013]
- Examine the basic postulates of positivism and post-positivism. [2017]
- How far are sociologists justified in using positivist approach to understand social reality? Explain with suitable illustrations. [2021]

The Critique of Positivism

This is asked directly and often (2025, 2022, 2017, 2013). Organise the critique into philosophical, methodological and political strands, because a list of complaints reads as a list, whereas three strands read as an argument.

- The philosophical critique, that social reality is not thing-like: human beings possess consciousness, attach meanings to their conduct, and act on interpretations, whereas molecules do not. To treat social facts as things is therefore reification, mistaking a human product for a natural object. Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958) presses this to its limit: social behaviour is rule-following, not law-governed, and to understand an action is to grasp the rules and meanings that constitute it, which is a conceptual task, not a causal one. On Winch's account, the search for causal laws in society is a confusion, not merely a difficulty.
- The methodological critique, that positivism's facts are not given but made. Jack Douglas' *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (1967) turned Durkheim's own showpiece against him: suicide rates are not raw data but the end product of a social process in which coroners, families, priests and officials negotiate a classification. Catholic communities may under-report suicide precisely because it is a sin, which would

generate Durkheim's central correlation as an artefact of record-keeping. J. Maxwell Atkinson's *Discovering Suicide* (1978) pushed the ethnomethodological version: what needs studying is the common sense reasoning coroners use to decide. Barry Hindess' *The Use of Official Statistics in Sociology* (1973) generalises the point to all state statistics.

- The measurement critique: Aaron Cicourel's *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (1964) argued that sociology's quantification rests on 'measurement by fiat', imposing numerical categories on phenomena whose meaning has not been established, so that precision is bought at the cost of validity. Herbert Blumer's 'Sociological Analysis and the Variable' (1956) is the parallel attack: variable analysis strips out the interpretive process through which actors actually construct their conduct.
- The political critique, from the Frankfurt School: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that positivism is instrumental reason in academic dress. By restricting knowledge to what is, it disqualifies the question of what ought to be, and so silently endorses the existing order. A science that can describe inequality but is forbidden to criticise it serves inequality. This erupted publicly as the *Positivismusstreit*, the positivist dispute in German sociology of the 1960s, with Adorno and Habermas against Popper and Hans Albert.
- Jurgen Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) supplies the systematic version: knowledge is always constituted by an interest. The empirical-analytic sciences serve a technical interest in prediction and control; the historical-hermeneutic sciences serve a practical interest in mutual understanding; the critical sciences serve an emancipatory interest in freeing people from unrecognised domination. Positivism's error is to universalise the first and deny the other two.
- The critique from within science: Popper rejected positivism's inductivism, arguing that no number of confirmations establishes a law, and that science advances by conjecture and refutation. Kuhn denied that observation is theory-neutral. Both mean that even natural science does not work the way positivism said it did, which undercuts naturalism at its root.
- Post-positivism and critical realism, which is what the 2017 question on post-positivism wants: post-positivism retains the aim of objective knowledge but concedes that observation is theory-laden, that facts are fallible, and that the researcher's values intrude, so it seeks not proof but corroboration under critical scrutiny. Roy Bhaskar's *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) offers the sophisticated settlement: reality is stratified into the empirical, the actual and the real, and science seeks the generative mechanisms that produce events. Naturalism is possible but qualified, because social structures, unlike natural ones, do not exist independently of the activities they govern and of the actors' conceptions of them. Society is both the ever-present condition and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency.
- Giddens' double hermeneutic names what positivism cannot accommodate: the objects of social science answer back, hold their own theories, and change their behaviour when told what the sociologist found. There is no equivalent in chemistry.
- The balanced conclusion, which the word 'critically' obliges: positivism gave sociology its empirical discipline, its insistence on evidence over speculation, its comparative method and its refusal of armchair theorising, and Durkheim's demonstration that rates are social remains unrefuted. What it could not do was accommodate meaning. The mature position is neither to embrace nor to discard it, but to hold that explanation and understanding are complementary, which is what Weber attempted.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What is positivism? Critically analyze the major arguments against it. [2025]
- What are the shortfalls of positivist philosophy that gave rise to the non-positivist methods of studying social reality? [2022]
- Phenomenological perspectives in Sociology reject many of the assumption of positivism. Comment. [2020]
- Explain ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspectives as critique of positivism. [2017]
- Examine the basic postulates of positivism and post-positivism. [2017]

Weber's Verstehen: Interpretive Sociology as the Bridge

Weber is routinely misfiled as an anti-positivist. He is not. His definition of sociology demands interpretive understanding and causal explanation, in one sentence, and the whole point of his methodology is that these are not alternatives. Answers that make him the opposite of Durkheim miss what makes him difficult and valuable.

- Weber's definition, in *Economy and Society*: sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. Read the sentence twice. Both halves are compulsory, and 'thereby' is the load-bearing word: understanding is the route to causal explanation, not a substitute for it.
- Social action is Weber's unit: behaviour to which the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning, and which takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. Behaviour without meaning is not action; action that ignores others is not social. A cyclist swerving to avoid another cyclist is social action; a reflex sneeze is not.
- Verstehen has two forms, and naming both is a mark of precision. *Aktuelles Verstehen*, direct observational understanding: you see a man raise an axe over wood and you understand that he is chopping. *Erklarendes Verstehen*, explanatory or motivational understanding: you grasp why, whether he chops for wages, for exercise, or to work off a rage. Only the second yields explanation, because it places the act in an intelligible complex of meaning.
- The intellectual sources: Wilhelm Dilthey's separation of the *Geisteswissenschaften* from the *Naturwissenschaften*, captured in his formulation that we explain nature but we understand mental life; and the neo-Kantians Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert on the nomothetic/idiographic distinction and on value-relevance. Weber accepted the distinctiveness of the cultural sciences without conceding that they must abandon causality.
- The ideal type is Weber's instrument for keeping both halves. It is a mental construct formed by the one-sided accentuation of certain elements of reality into a logically coherent, internally consistent picture. Its defining property: it is not found anywhere in reality and is not meant to be. It is a measuring rod, a heuristic, and its value is judged by usefulness, not by truth. Bureaucracy, the Protestant ethic, and the three types of legitimate authority are ideal types. This is how Weber generalises without pretending to universal laws.
- Weber's methodological individualism: collectivities such as the state or the corporation must be treated, for sociological purposes, as the resultants and modes of organisation of the particular acts of individual persons, because only individuals can be the bearers of subjectively meaningful conduct. Contrast Durkheim exactly here: for Durkheim society is *sui generis* and irreducible, for Weber it is analysable into meaningful action. This is the sharpest available Durkheim/Weber contrast and it is worth deploying whenever a question invites comparison.

- The verification requirement that saves Weber from subjectivism: interpretation must be both adequate at the level of meaning (the account must be subjectively intelligible) and causally adequate (the sequence must be shown to actually recur, in the sense of probability). A meaningful story that never happens is not an explanation. This is the point most answers omit, and it is exactly why Weber is a bridge rather than a rejection.
- The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904 to 1905) is Verstehen in operation: Weber reconstructs what Calvinist doctrine meant to believers, the anxiety of predestination and the search for signs of election, and shows how methodical worldly asceticism became an unintended condition for rational capitalism. It is not a refutation of Marx but a demonstration that ideas can be causally efficacious, an inversion of the base/superstructure priority rather than a denial of material factors.
- The 2024 question links objectivity to non-positivist methods; the 2025 question asks how Verstehen addresses the objectivity/subjectivity debate. The answer to both is the same: Weber's claim is that studying subjective meaning does not entail subjective results, because ideal types are publicly specifiable, causal adequacy is checkable, and the researcher's own values are excluded from the findings even though they legitimately select the topic. Whether that claim survives is the fact/value section.

KEY TERMS

Verstehen — Weber's method of interpretive understanding: grasping the subjective meaning an actor attaches to conduct, as the route to causally explaining it.

Ideal type — A one-sided, logically pure mental construct used as a measuring rod against which messy reality is compared; deliberately not a description of any actual case.

Causal adequacy — Weber's requirement that an interpretation be shown to correspond to an actual probability that the sequence of events recurs, not merely that it be intelligible.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- How does Weber's Verstehen address the objectivity-subjectivity debate in sociology? [2025]
- Elaborate the main tenets of interpretative perspective in sociology. [2017]
- In what way 'Interpretative' method is different from the 'positivist' approach in the study of social phenomena? Explain with examples, the explanatory and exploratory designs of Social research. [2018]
- How does a researcher achieve objectivity in interpretative research? [2022]
- Methodology is a system of rules, principles and procedures, which forms scientific investigation. Comment. [2020]

Fact, Value and Weber's Value-Neutrality

Two distinctions decide this whole section, and confusing them is the commonest failure in the unit. First, fact against value. Second, and far more important, value-relevance against value-freedom. UPSC asked the difference between objectivity and value neutrality in 2014, and the answer turns on exactly these.

- A fact is a statement about what is, in principle verifiable against evidence: 'the female literacy rate in Bihar is lower than in Kerala'. A value is a statement about what ought to be, expressing a preference or an evaluative standard: 'that gap is unjust'. No accumulation of the first entails the second. This is David Hume's is/ought gap, and Weber's methodology is built on accepting it.
- Weber's key sources are 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy' (1904) and the essay on ethical neutrality (1917), together with the lecture 'Science as a Vocation' (1917, published 1919).

- Wertbeziehung, value-relevance: values are unavoidable and legitimate in selecting what to study. Reality is infinite; no researcher can study all of it; the choice of what is worth investigating is necessarily made from a cultural viewpoint. That a scholar studies caste discrimination because she finds it repugnant is not a defect. It is the only way any topic gets chosen at all.
- Wertfreiheit, value-freedom or ethical neutrality: once the topic is chosen, values must not determine the findings. The researcher must not select evidence to fit a conclusion, must report results that embarrass her own politics, and must not smuggle prescription into description.
- Put the two together and Weber's position is compact enough to write in one line: values legitimately govern the selection of the problem; they must not govern the solution. Almost every answer that goes wrong here claims Weber wanted sociology to be value-free in the choice of topic, which he explicitly did not.
- 'Science as a Vocation' adds the classroom rule and the deeper pessimism. The lecture hall is not a place for prophets or demagogues; the teacher's privilege of a captive audience is not a licence to stamp students with his politics. And more radically: science can clarify means, expose the costs of ends, and force us to see the implications of our commitments, but it cannot tell us how to live. The gods of the different value spheres are in irreconcilable struggle, Weber's 'polytheism of values'. Science cannot adjudicate between them.
- Now the distinction the 2014 question demands. Objectivity is a property of the findings: their correspondence to evidence, freedom from distortion, replicability by others. It is the goal. Value-neutrality is a stance of the researcher: refusing to let personal preferences intrude into the inquiry. It is one means to that goal.
- The consequences of that distinction are what earn the marks. They can come apart in both directions. A researcher may be scrupulously value-neutral and still produce non-objective work, through a bad sample, a leading questionnaire, or a flawed instrument. And a researcher may be openly value-committed and still produce objective work, provided the values are declared and the evidence is handled honestly. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) is the standing example of the second: an avowedly anti-racist study that is also a rigorous one.
- Myrdal's alternative, from *Objectivity in Social Research* (1969), is the most practical position on offer and belongs in every answer here: value-free social science is impossible, because valuations enter at every stage from the choice of concepts to the framing of questions. Hidden values are the danger, not values as such. The remedy is not to pretend to neutrality but to state your value premises explicitly and in advance, so that readers can discount for them and so that the logic connecting premises to conclusions is exposed to scrutiny. Objectivity is achieved by transparency, not by concealment.

KEY TERMS

Wertbeziehung (value-relevance) — Weber's concession that the researcher's values legitimately determine which slice of infinite reality is selected as worth studying.

Wertfreiheit (value-freedom) — Weber's requirement that, once a topic is chosen, the researcher's values must not influence the findings or be smuggled into them as conclusions.

Value premises — Myrdal's remedy for unavoidable bias: explicit, prior declaration of the valuations guiding a study, so readers can assess and discount them.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- How is objectivity different from value neutrality? Discuss with reference to Weber's views on methodology. [2014]
- Is Sociology a Value-free Science? Discuss. [2020]
- What is 'Value free Sociology'? Clarify. [2016]
- Examine the problems of maintaining objectivity and value neutrality in Social Science research. [2015]

The Critique of Value-Neutrality: Gouldner, Becker and the Sociology of Knowledge

Weber's settlement did not hold. The attack came from three directions: that value-freedom is psychologically impossible, that it is sociologically naive because all knowledge is socially located, and that it is politically dishonest because neutrality between the strong and the weak is a choice.

- Alvin Gouldner's 'Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of a Value-Free Sociology' (1962) is the essential reference and should be named precisely. His charge is not that value-freedom is difficult, but that it had degenerated into a professional myth. It began as Weber's honourable attempt to protect scholarship from the state and the party, and it ended as a licence for moral indifference, allowing sociologists to sell their skills to whoever paid, since as scientists they were not responsible for the uses of their work. Value-freedom became a way of being useful without being accountable.
- Gouldner's 'The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology' (1970) develops the constructive half: every sociology rests on 'domain assumptions' and background sentiments about human nature and society, which the practitioner usually cannot see. The remedy is a reflexive sociology, one that turns its own tools on itself and makes the sociologist's own social position and assumptions part of the analysis.
- Howard Becker's 'Whose Side Are We On?' (1967) argues from the opposite flank: the question is not whether to take sides, since research is always conducted from someone's point of view, but which side. He introduced the 'hierarchy of credibility': in any stratified system, those at the top are presumed to have the right to define how things really are, and their account is treated as fact while the subordinate's account is treated as complaint. Simply reporting the official version is not neutrality, it is unnoticed partisanship. Becker's answer: study from the standpoint of the subordinate, and be open about it.
- Gouldner replied to Becker in 'The Sociologist as Partisan' (1968), and the disagreement is worth knowing because it stops your answer from collapsing into slogans. Gouldner argued that Becker's underdog sympathy was itself a sentimental and unexamined value position, often serving the liberal welfare bureaucracy, and that trading a bias for the powerful for a bias for the powerless is not reflexivity. Both agree that value-freedom is a myth; they disagree about what to do next.
- Karl Mannheim's 'Ideology and Utopia' (1929) supplies the sociology of knowledge foundation: thought is existentially connected to the thinker's social position (Seinsverbundenheit), so there is no view from nowhere. Mannheim stops short of relativism, calling his position relationism: knowledge is relative to standpoint but not thereby arbitrary, since standpoints can be compared and synthesised. His candidate for the synthesiser is the relatively classless, 'free-floating intelligentsia', a term he took from Alfred Weber. The obvious objection, which you should make: intellectuals have social locations too, and Mannheim's escape hatch conveniently exempts his own profession.
- The Marxist position: Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that philosophers have only interpreted the world while the point is to change it, rejects the whole fact/value settlement. Knowledge is class-bound; the appearance of neutrality is ideology performing its function of making a partisan order look natural.

- Feminist standpoint theory is the most developed contemporary version and inverts the objectivity claim rather than abandoning it. Dorothy Smith's *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987) argued for a sociology from the standpoint of women, showing how the 'relations of ruling' organise experience from outside it. Nancy Hartsock's 'The Feminist Standpoint' (1983) grounded the claim in the sexual division of labour. Sandra Harding's 'strong objectivity' makes the decisive move: research starting from marginalised lives is not more biased but less partial, because the dominant standpoint is precisely the one that cannot see its own conditions of privilege. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) adds the 'outsider within' position. Note the sting: conventional objectivity, on this account, is 'weak' objectivity, since it screens the researcher's values but not the discipline's shared, invisible ones.
- Pierre Bourdieu offers the most workable synthesis, in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992, with Loic Wacquant). Reflexivity is not confessional autobiography and not despair. It is participant objectivation: turning the instruments of the discipline back on the objectifying subject, and objectifying three biases, the researcher's social origins, her position in the academic field, and above all the 'scholastic fallacy', the intellectualist bias of treating the world as a spectacle to be interpreted rather than a set of problems to be practically solved. Objectivity is not a starting condition. It is a collective achievement of a field with critical rules.
- The conclusion that works for any question here: total value-freedom is unattainable, and pretending otherwise hides bias rather than removing it. But abandoning the aspiration invites propaganda. The workable position is procedural: declare your value premises (Myrdal), objectify your position (Bourdieu, Gouldner), submit to peer scrutiny and replication, actively seek disconfirming evidence, triangulate, and separate the descriptive claim from the prescriptive one on the page. Objectivity survives as a discipline of method and a property of the community, not as a state of mind.

KEY TERMS

Domain assumptions — Gouldner's term for the background beliefs about human nature and society that silently shape a sociologist's theory and are usually invisible to its author.

Hierarchy of credibility — Becker's term for the presumption that those at the top of an institution have the right to define reality, so that their account is treated as fact and the subordinate's as complaint.

Strong objectivity — Harding's claim that starting research from marginalised standpoints yields less partial knowledge, since dominant positions cannot see their own conditions.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Do you think 'objectivity' is an over-hyped idea in sociological research? Discuss the merits and demerits of non-positivist methods. [2024]
- How does a researcher achieve objectivity in interpretative research? [2022]
- Examine the problems of maintaining objectivity and value neutrality in Social Science research. [2015]

Non-Positivist Methodologies I: Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology

Non-positivist does not mean unscientific and it does not mean 'qualitative'. It means a different object: not causes of behaviour, but the methods by which people construct and sustain a world that appears factual to them. Both strands here share one radical move: they stop treating common sense as an obstacle and make it the topic.

- Phenomenology begins in philosophy with Edmund Husserl: the epoche or bracketing of the natural attitude, intentionality (consciousness is always consciousness of something), and the Lebenswelt or

lifeworld, the taken-for-granted world of immediate experience that all science presupposes and none can examine.

- Alfred Schutz brought it into sociology in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932), fusing Husserl with Weber. His argument against Weber: Weber invoked subjective meaning but never explained how meaning is constituted or how shared meaning is possible at all. Schutz's answer: we operate in the natural attitude, taking the world's existence for granted, using typifications, standardised recipes and categories inherited from our 'stock of knowledge at hand', and we assume the reciprocity of perspectives, that others see the world as we would from their position and that our typifications are shared. He distinguished 'because-motives', which look backward to the actor's past, from 'in-order-to motives', which look forward to a projected act.
- Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) is the most examinable descendant. Their dialectic runs in three moments: externalisation (humans pour themselves out into activity), objectivation (that activity hardens into an apparently objective, thing-like reality confronting its makers), and internalisation (the next generation absorbs that reality through socialisation as simply the way things are). Habitualisation precedes institutionalisation; reification is the final step, when a human product is experienced as a natural fact or divine will. Their subject is exactly common sense knowledge, on the ground that it, not theory, is the knowledge that constitutes the reality people actually inhabit.
- Ethnomethodology was founded by Harold Garfinkel in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). The name is literal: the study of members' own methods, the folk methods ordinary people use to produce and account for the orderliness of everyday life. Note the inversion, which is the whole point: for Durkheim, social order is a fact to be explained; for Garfinkel, social order is an ongoing practical accomplishment, achieved moment by moment by members, and the question is how they do it.
- Garfinkel's core concepts: indexicality, meaning that the sense of any utterance depends irremediably on its context, so no account is ever complete in itself; reflexivity, meaning that accounts do not merely describe a situation but constitute it, since describing a meeting as a meeting is part of what makes it one; the documentary method of interpretation, whereby members treat appearances as documents of an underlying pattern while using the presumed pattern to interpret the appearances; and accounts, the ordinary practices by which members make settings observable and reportable.
- The breaching experiments are the method: disrupt the taken-for-granted, and the invisible rules become visible through the outrage. Students were sent home to behave as polite lodgers with their own families; experimenters responded to 'How are you?' by demanding to know in what respect. The reactions, bewilderment, then anger, then moral sanction, demonstrate that the background expectancies are not conventions people happen to follow but constitutive conditions of intelligible interaction.
- Garfinkel's target was Parsons, under whom he studied. His charge: Parsonian theory produces a 'cultural dope', an actor who merely enacts internalised norms handed down by the system. Real members are skilled practical reasoners who interpret, improvise and negotiate rules in situ, and who use rules as resources rather than obeying them as programmes.
- Aaron Cicourel's *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (1964) and *The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice* (1968) apply this to research itself: sociology's own measurements are produced by the same unexamined common sense procedures, and delinquency 'rates' record police and probation officers' background typifications of what a delinquent looks like, not the incidence of delinquent acts. Conversation analysis, developed by Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff, is ethnomethodology's most technically rigorous offshoot, showing that turn-taking is a machinery with describable rules.

- The 2021 question asks whether ethnomethodology yields reliable and valid data, and it is a trap worth spotting. The honest answer: on the conventional criteria it scores poorly on reliability, since breaching experiments and conversational settings are hard to standardise and replicate, but very high on validity, because it captures what actually organises interaction rather than what a questionnaire imposes. The deeper answer: ethnomethodology contests the criteria themselves, since reliability and validity are also members' practical accomplishments, produced by the coding practices of researchers. Answer on both levels.
- The standard criticisms, which any 'critically examine' requires: it is trivial, spending enormous effort proving what everyone already knows; it is politically blind, describing how order is accomplished while ignoring who benefits from that order; it has no account of power, structure, inequality or history; and, as Gouldner charged, its radicalism is confined to method while leaving the world untouched.

KEY TERMS

Typification — Schutz's term for the standardised, recipe-like categories from our stock of knowledge that we apply to make persons and situations intelligible without fresh inquiry.

Indexicality — Garfinkel's term for the irremediable context-dependence of meaning: no account carries its sense independently of the occasion of its use.

Breaching experiment — Garfinkel's technique of deliberately disrupting taken-for-granted expectancies so that the constitutive rules of interaction become visible through members' reactions.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Do you think ethnomethodology helps us in getting reliable and valid data? Justify your answer. [2021]
- Explain ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspectives as critique of positivism. [2017]
- Phenomenological perspectives in Sociology reject many of the assumption of positivism. Comment. [2020]
- Is non-positivism methodology scientific? Illustrate. [2018]

Non-Positivist Methodologies II: Symbolic Interactionism

The third strand is the most influential and the most examinable, because it supplies both a theory of the self and a methodology. It is also the one most often reduced to Goffman anecdotes. Lead with Mead and Blumer's premises, and the anecdotes will do real work.

- George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1934, compiled posthumously from students' notes) is the foundation. The self is not given at birth; it emerges through social interaction, via significant symbols, above all language, which permit us to take the attitude of the other toward ourselves. The self therefore has two phases: the 'Me', the organised attitudes of others internalised, the socialised object; and the 'I', the spontaneous, unpredictable, creative response of the organism. Conduct is the ongoing conversation between them, which is how Mead builds agency into a social theory of the self.
- Mead's stages: the play stage, where the child takes the role of one significant other at a time, playing at being mother or doctor; and the game stage, where the child must simultaneously take the roles of all other participants and grasp the rules as a whole, arriving at the generalised other, the attitude of the community as such. Charles Horton Cooley's looking-glass self (1902) is the companion idea: we imagine how we appear to another, imagine their judgement of that appearance, and experience a self-feeling such as pride or shame.

- Herbert Blumer coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' in 1937 and codified it in *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (1969). His three premises are the most efficient thing to memorise in this section. One: human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them. Two: such meanings arise out of social interaction. Three: meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things she encounters. Premise three is the crucial one, since it makes the actor an interpreter rather than a conduit for meanings.
- Blumer's methodology follows from his premises and is the reason this section belongs in a methodology unit. If meaning is constructed through interpretation, then research must get close to the empirical world rather than impose categories on it. He prescribed exploration, a flexible, broad, self-correcting immersion in the setting, followed by inspection, the intensive analytical examination of the concepts thus formed. His injunction was to respect the nature of the empirical world and organise a methodological stance to reflect it, which is a direct rebuke to designing an instrument before you understand the setting.
- The W.I. Thomas theorem, from Thomas and Thomas (1928), is the perspective in one line: if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. The definition of the situation, not the objective situation, drives conduct. Merton later built the self-fulfilling prophecy on this foundation.
- Erving Goffman's dramaturgy, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), analyses interaction as theatre: front stage and back stage regions, performance, props, impression management, teams, and face-work. *Asylums* (1961) gave the total institution, with its mortification of the self, and *Stigma* (1963) analysed spoiled identity and the management of discrediting information. Goffman's method was ethnographic observation of the kind no questionnaire could replicate.
- The internal split is worth a sentence, because it shows you know the field is not monolithic: the Chicago School, following Blumer, insisted on naturalistic, qualitative methods; the Iowa School, under Manford Kuhn, held that the self could be operationalised and measured, and produced the Twenty Statements Test. Symbolic interactionism is therefore not intrinsically anti-quantitative; Blumer's version is.
- The standard criticisms, which the exam expects: it has an 'astructural bias', in Gouldner's phrase, dissolving society into encounters and losing structure, history and the economy; it cannot explain why some definitions of the situation prevail over others, which is a question about power; it neglects the unequal distribution of the very resources with which people manage impressions; and its concepts are vague and its findings hard to accumulate. Marxists add that Goffman's actors are so busy managing appearances that exploitation never comes into view.
- The defence to close on: symbolic interactionism supplies precisely what positivism cannot, an account of how social order is produced from the inside, by interpreting actors. Read alongside a structural account rather than against one, it explains the mechanism by which large structures are reproduced in the small: caste, gender and class do not act, people acting on their definitions of caste, gender and class do.

KEY TERMS

Generalised other — Mead's term for the internalised attitude of the community as a whole, achieved in the game stage, against which the individual regulates conduct.

Definition of the situation — Thomas' concept that actors respond to their interpretation of a situation, not to its objective features, so definitions have real consequences.

Total institution — Goffman's term for a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society, lead an enclosed, formally administered life.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- 'Non-positivistic methodology is essential for understanding human behavior.' Discuss. [2015]
- Is non-positivism methodology scientific? Illustrate. [2018]

Last-mile revision

- Never answer 'Is sociology a science?' without first stating the postulates of science you are applying. Verdict: a science in method (systematic, empirical, public, self-correcting), not in the Newtonian sense of universal predictive law.
- Popper: falsifiability, not verifiability, is the demarcation criterion; Marxism and psychoanalysis fail it. Kuhn: paradigms, normal science, revolutions; even natural science is not what positivism described. Ritzer: sociology is a multiple paradigm science (social facts, social definition, social behaviour).
- Separate positivism's three layers: epistemology (only observables), methodology (unity of scientific method), philosophy of history (three stages). Only the first two reach Durkheim.
- Durkheim's social fact: external, constraining, general, sui generis. Rules: treat social facts as things; eradicate preconceptions; define by external characteristics; explain a social fact by antecedent social facts; separate cause from function; use concomitant variation as the substitute for experiment.
- Suicide (1897): eliminate extra-social causes, then explain the rate by integration and regulation. Egoistic (low integration), altruistic (high), anomic (low regulation), fatalistic (high, footnote only).
- Critique of positivism in three strands: philosophical (reification; Winch: rule-following not law-governed), methodological (Douglas and Atkinson on suicide statistics as coroners' constructs; Hindess on official statistics; Cicourel's measurement by fiat; Blumer on variable analysis), political (Frankfurt School, Positivismusstreit, Habermas' three knowledge-constitutive interests).
- Post-positivism keeps the aim of objectivity but concedes theory-laden observation and fallible facts. Bhaskar's critical realism: stratified reality, generative mechanisms, qualified naturalism, society both condition and outcome of agency.
- Weber's definition demands BOTH interpretive understanding AND causal explanation. 'Thereby' is the load-bearing word. He is a bridge, not an anti-positivist.
- Verstehen has two forms: aktuelles (direct observational) and erklärendes (explanatory/motivational). Interpretation must be adequate at the level of meaning AND causally adequate.
- Ideal type: one-sided accentuation, logically pure, deliberately not found in reality, judged by usefulness not truth. Weber's methodological individualism is the sharpest contrast with Durkheim's sui generis society.
- The distinction that wins the 2014 question: value-relevance (Wertbeziehung) governs the SELECTION of the problem and is legitimate; value-freedom (Wertfreiheit) governs the FINDINGS and is compulsory. Values choose the question, not the answer.
- Objectivity is the goal and a property of findings; value-neutrality is a means and a stance of the researcher. They come apart: value-neutral but non-objective (bad method), or value-committed but objective (Myrdal).
- Myrdal: value-free social science is impossible; state your value premises explicitly. Objectivity through transparency, not concealment.
- Gouldner's 'Anti-Minotaur' (1962): value-freedom degenerated from Weber's shield into a licence for moral indifference. 'Coming Crisis' (1970): domain assumptions, reflexive sociology. Becker (1967): hierarchy of credibility, take the underdog's side openly. Gouldner replied that Becker's underdog sentimentality is itself an unexamined value.
- Mannheim: Seinsverbundenheit, relationism not relativism, the free-floating intelligentsia (criticise this escape hatch). Standpoint theory: Smith's relations of ruling, Harding's strong objectivity, Collins' outsider within.

- Bourdieu's reflexivity is participant objectivation: objectify social origins, position in the academic field, and the scholastic fallacy. Objectivity is a collective achievement of a field, not a state of mind.
- Schutz: natural attitude, typifications, stock of knowledge at hand, reciprocity of perspectives, because-motives vs in-order-to motives. Berger and Luckmann: externalisation, objectivation, internalisation; reification.
- Garfinkel: order is a practical accomplishment, not a fact to be explained. Indexicality, reflexivity, documentary method, accounts, breaching experiments; Parsons' actor is a 'cultural dope'.
- Blumer's three premises: meanings drive action; meanings arise in interaction; meanings are handled through an interpretative process. Method: exploration then inspection. Mead: I and Me, play and game stages, generalised other. Thomas theorem: definitions of the situation are real in their consequences.

Common errors to avoid

- Making Weber an anti-positivist opposed to Durkheim. Weber's own definition demands causal explanation, and he required causal adequacy as well as meaning adequacy. He is the bridge between positivism and interpretivism, and answers that flatten him into the anti-positivist camp lose the entire point of Verstehen.
- Claiming Weber wanted values excluded from the choice of research topic. He said the exact opposite: value-relevance is unavoidable and legitimate in selection. Value-freedom applies to the findings only. This single confusion sinks more answers in this unit than any other.
- Treating objectivity and value-neutrality as synonyms. Objectivity is the goal, a property of findings; value-neutrality is a means, a stance of the researcher. The 2014 question is asking precisely for the gap between them, and a synonym answer scores nothing.
- Attributing 'value-free sociology' to Durkheim or Comte as a slogan. The doctrine of Wertfreiheit is Weber's; positivism's fact/value separation is a related but distinct claim.
- Getting Gouldner's argument backwards. He did not say value-freedom is merely hard to achieve; he said it had become a professional myth that licensed selling sociology to the highest bidder. And do not merge him with Becker: Gouldner attacked Becker's underdog partisanship as sentimental.
- Calling ideal types averages, typologies, or descriptions of typical cases. An ideal type is a deliberately one-sided logical construct that exists nowhere in reality; its test is usefulness, not accuracy.
- Confusing anomic with fatalistic suicide, or forgetting that integration governs egoistic and altruistic while regulation governs anomic and fatalistic. Also note fatalistic suicide appears only in a footnote in Durkheim's text.
- Writing that ethnomethodology and phenomenology are simply 'qualitative methods'. They are not techniques; they are positions on what social reality is. Ethnomethodology's object is members' own methods of producing order, which is not the same as doing interviews.
- Confusing Mead's 'I' with the 'Me'. The Me is the internalised organised attitudes of others; the I is the spontaneous, unpredictable response. Also note Blumer, not Mead, coined 'symbolic interactionism'.
- Answering 'Is non-positivist methodology scientific?' with a flat yes or no. The productive answer contests the criteria: if science means falsifiable causal law, non-positivism is not science; if science means systematic, rigorous, evidence-disciplined inquiry appropriate to its object, it is.
- Using Douglas' critique of Suicide without noticing it cuts both ways. If official statistics are social constructs, that undermines a great deal of quantitative sociology, including much that critics of Durkheim rely on elsewhere.