

Sociology Factsheet



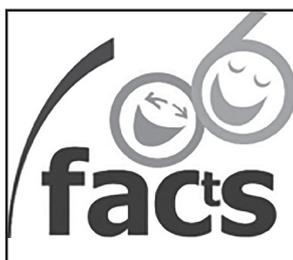
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Objectivity and Subjectivity

What do these terms mean and why are they important in sociology?

This Factsheet will answer these questions. The information in this Factsheet will be useful for answering research methods questions as well as being useful for evaluating research used in your exam answers.



Objectivity is the degree to which a researcher is able to remain neutral and impartial in carrying out research, not allowing their own feelings and preconceptions to influence the research design, results and interpretation of the findings.

The research process and findings should remain completely independent of, and uninfluenced by, subjective influences such as personal feelings, prejudices, opinions, beliefs, values or interpretations of the researcher.

Subjectivity is a view that is based on emotive, anecdotal, and/or personal experience. It is the opposite of 'objectivity', which attempts to be bias or judgement free and data driven.

Sociologists are part of the society they are studying, and therefore they are involved in what they are researching. Their own values and beliefs are likely to affect the research in some way.

Objectivity	Subjectivity
Impartiality	Personal feelings, tastes, or opinions.
Absence of bias and prejudice	Meanings
Fairness	Individual judgements
Factual	Individual views
Judgement free	

Activity: Are the following objective or subjective?

The colour of a jumper

The winner of the 100 meter race

The best performer in the X factor

How to spell objectivity

$2 + 2 = 4$

Favourite football team

Apples fall to the ground

Best teacher in your school



Why is this debate about objectivity and subjectivity important in sociology?

All researchers, whatever they are studying, want their research to be taken seriously and accepted by their peers and the wider community.

There are two groups of sociologists: **Positivists** and **Interpretivists**.



Positivists argue that sociological research should be objective so that their research can be measured.

Positivism is the search for laws of social behaviour using the logic and methods of the natural sciences. It favours certain methods e.g. social survey, and emphasises the scientific characteristics of reliability, objectivity and quantifiable data.

Positivists believe:

- Social institutions create expectations on how individuals should behave and they limit their choices and options.
- The aim of sociology should be to study social facts which could be observed and measured quantitatively and in statistical form. The feelings, emotions and motives of individuals cannot be observed or measured, and should not therefore be studied.
- They need evidence otherwise it will not be possible to replicate (repeat) studies to check findings, establish the causes of social events, or make generalisations.
- Research methods that produce quantitative data which can be measured are used to collect data.
- Positivists believe that it is possible to study society objectively and should therefore be value free. Such objective, value free sociology could then provide the facts that might be used to influence social policy and improve the world.
- Positivists would therefore use research methods such as questionnaires, formal interviews and official statistics.



Exam Hint: It is important that you know the differences between objectivity and subjectivity and that you can give examples to support your explanations

190. Objectivity and Subjectivity

Exam Hint: Make sure you know studies that can be used to support what you are writing and that you can explain why they support the point you have made. Don't just 'drop in' a study without clearly showing how it supports what you have written.

Most sociologists today will try to use both objective and subjective research techniques when conducting research. Recent studies illustrate the benefits of using both positivist and interpretivist approaches.

Activity: Complete a table similar to the one below to summarise the advantages and disadvantages of objective research and subjective research. Add more advantages and disadvantages to the table.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Objective research	Measurable	Lacks detail
Subjective research	More detailed findings	Difficult to measure

Objectivity and subjectivity are often seen as two extremes, but most research is influenced by subjective elements and values to a greater or lesser extent. Subjectivity and objectivity should not be seen as an either/or situation, but as a continuum: a line with two very different extremes at either end, but with each in between stage having only small differences between them. Much sociology falls in the mid-position between the two extremes

Exam Hint:

1. Outline and explain two ways in which a sociologists subjective beliefs and values may influence sociological research

This question is asking you identify 2 different ways in which subjective beliefs may influence research. You could include:

- Choice of research method
- Choice of topic
- How research is conducted
- Theoretical viewpoint

2. Item A

Some argue that it is possible for sociologists to study society in a completely objective way. Others suggest that sociologists cannot avoid the influence of values completely and it is impossible to complete truly objective research.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the view that objectivity is an ideal to strive for in sociology, but it is impossible to achieve.

In answering this question, you need to:

- Use the item – it is really important that you quote from the item in your answer
- Use other information to support your argument
- Evaluate – make sure that you look at both sides of the debate:

One side of the debate: Objectivity is ideal to strive for in sociology. Give the reasons why (e.g. measuring facts, quantitative data, allows for comparisons etc)

The other side of the debate: Objectivity is impossible to achieve. Give reasons why (e.g. views and opinions of researcher and participants, research methods used, theoretical viewpoint of researcher.

Conclusion

You then need a conclusion: how important is it to strive for objectivity? Is it necessary in sociology?