

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

SOCIOLOGY

OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in Sociology

H580

For first teaching in 2015

H580/02 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 2 series overview

In this year's paper, there were a wide range of responses which differentiated candidates effectively. The vast majority of candidates were able to attempt all set questions on the paper. There were a significant minority of candidates who misinterpreted questions or aspects of questions - particularly Questions 2 and 6 - but in general the questions seemed accessible to most candidates who had prepared for the paper. Time was effectively managed between the demands of the questions. There was a mixed response between candidates who answered Section A first and candidates who chose Section B. There was a tendency to provide extended responses to Question 1 and Question 2, with these often being the same length as Question 3. These questions do not require extended responses and can take up valuable time from the higher tariff questions.

Assessment for learning



Encourage candidates to practice Questions 1 and 2 using qualitative and quantitative source material within lessons to perfect their timing, length of their response and optimal application of the source. Model responses could also be used as starters for candidates to mark to illustrate the expectations for these questions.

Some candidates did not number questions or clearly label additional answer booklets. Encourage students to label questions by their number, *not* by how many marks the question is worth. This can be very confusing for example in Questions 1 and 2 if a candidate labels them as '4' and '6'. If additional paper is used, encourage candidates to *clearly* label each question. Typically, additional paper is used for questions in Section B, where there is more likely to be cross-over in terms of content. This can become very confusing for examiners if questions have not been clearly labelled and can lead to responses being marked against a different question than the one intended by the candidate. In addition, handwriting can at times be difficult to read. There were a high number of word-processed submissions this year and should be a consideration for candidates where handwriting impacts on the examiners ability to read a candidate's responses.

Additional booklets

When using additional sheets or booklets, label each page clearly numerically so examiners can keep track.

Paragraphing is highly advised to clearly differentiate between points. Candidates who write in one continual block of text, are more likely to mix multiple ideas and not develop one core point - which is what gains them maximum marks.

Assessment for learning



Candidates should practice writing individual paragraphs for each question. Study the mark scheme to determine how many developed points are required to reach maximum marks for each assessment objective and build scaffolds around this. Moreover, encourage writing frames for their paragraphs. For example, knowledge point, explanation of the knowledge point, application of the source or provide evidence from sociological work, link back to the question. Encouraging candidates to provide standalone paragraphs could be used as starters to recap previous lessons, or plenaries to make the progress made in a lesson visible. Encourage candidates to review their work and highlight where they could add a connective (e.g. however a weakness, in criticism of, etc.). This helps candidates differentiate between AO1 and AO3 knowledge points.

For Question's 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 in order to gain the highest mark bands, candidates needed to include sociological evidence and to discuss them in depth. Sociological evidence can include studies, theories, methodological perspectives, key concepts, and statistics. When annotating responses, examiners will identify each knowledge point, annotate evidence, and then judge if it is undeveloped, underdeveloped or developed. This provides guidance as to where in the mark scheme the response lies. For example, in Question 4, if a candidate stated that data provided by a questionnaire is high in reliability, this would be undeveloped, as it is a correct statement, but without any further explanation.

Question structure

To get the highest mark in the essay questions, candidates should be aiming for the following range and depth:

Question 3: two fully developed points of knowledge (dependent on the question this could be two strengths, two weaknesses or one of each), reference to the source needs to be made for each knowledge point.

Question 4: four fully developed points of knowledge, of these two need to be strengths and two need to be weaknesses of the methodological approach (to provide balance). Again, each knowledge point should be supported by using the source.

Question 5: four fully developed points of knowledge, these should be clearly linked to the question, exploring at least two different areas of inequality, for example work and employment and education.

Question 6: four fully developed points of knowledge and four fully developed points of evaluation

Candidates who achieved Levels 3 and 4 were able to support discussions with an accurate range of sociological evidence, using both sociological studies and theory. For source-based questions, some candidates struggled to move beyond lip service, lifting aspects of the source and not engaging with it to support their ideas. For example, in Question 3, an example of lip service would be 'Evans and Wyatt provided quotes from participants commenting on their experiences of social mobility', whereas an explicit application point would add to this by providing extracts from the actual quotes from the participants in the study provided by the source.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• demonstrated consistent and accurate use of sociological evidence • demonstrated frequent, explicit and engaged use of source material (Section A) • clearly structured responses, using connectives and paragraphs • detailed explanations of sociological evidence focused on the specifics of the question • in Section B, supported sociological evidence/concepts with contemporary examples and statistics, e.g. gender pay gap.	• demonstrated no or inaccurate use of sociological evidence • did not read the questions carefully • used the wrong source, not referring to the source or continually copying out the title of the source for Section A • lacked structure • over-relied on contemporary example.

Section A overview

This section contains four compulsory questions which refer to either Source A or Source B. In Questions 3 and 4, to reach the higher mark bands, candidates were expected to use methodological evidence and/or perspectives such as validity and reliability often supported by theory (positivism, interpretivism). As discussed in previous reports, there is no requirement to refer to alternative methodologies or sociological studies.

Misconception



Candidates do not need to use their time discussing alternative sociological studies, some tended to spend time writing extended overviews or comparisons with another example of research. This does not develop points any further.

Question 1

- 1 Using data from **Source A**, outline **two** conclusions that sociologists could reach about the experience of upward social mobility.

[4]

This question was answered generally very well. Many candidates were able to identify two conclusions regarding the experience of upward social mobility. For example, that individuals often feel inferior or self-conscious about their status within middle class professions, due to their working class backgrounds/origins. To gain full marks, candidates were required to extract one clear quote from the source material to support both conclusions made. Most candidates were able to do this. Some were not. Common errors tended to be that the candidate could not clearly identify a conclusion, or more frequently, apply the correct quote to the conclusion they had made. For example, if they reached the conclusion that 'individuals often feel inferior or self-conscious about their status within middle class professions, due to their working-class background', they may have used the following quotation 'Kate claimed the organisational culture is middle class, and you drink wine rather than beer'. This quote is far more applicable to a conclusion made regarding the different norms and values, or cultural capital that is bound to middle class occupations. Nothing in that quote implies a feeling of inferiority, whereas multiple other quotes do. Examiners did not accept vague, unclear conclusions or references.

Key point

This question should take approximately five minutes to answer, and candidates can achieve full marks through using the source material only. There is no requirement to offer sociological evidence surrounding issues related to social mobility.

Assessment for learning



Encourage practice of Question 1 as starter activities in lessons. Particularly explore the use of qualitative source material for Question 1 as candidates often feel more comfortable summarising or providing conclusions from a quantitative source. Encourage peer marking to understand the allocation of marks. Model responses could also be used as starters for candidates to mark to illustrate the expectations for these questions.

Exemplar 1

		Another Conclusion they could make is that
		individuals may feel hopeless / reluctant to
		go through upward social mobility if they
		are from a lower social class. For example,
		Nora says "I look at those on a
		higher pay grade to me and I think
		I could do that, but I could never
		dream of applying for that job - I know
		my place".

Exemplar 1 demonstrates a clear conclusion from the source material, explicitly supported by a quotation from the source that directly connects to the conclusion. It is concise with no surplus material. This done twice, would be representative of a full mark answer.

Question 2

2 With reference to **Source B**, explain **two** problems with government-funded research.

[6]

This question was generally not answered well by the majority of candidates. Most candidates could not identify two problems with governmental-funded research. For AO1, candidates needed to explain two problems with government-funded research. Of the candidates who were able to identify problems, they tended to include - bias (governments manipulating both the method and the data to promote themselves in a positive light), low response rate due to participants not supporting the government, and funding impacting the sample size. However, a significant number of candidates simply criticised the method in the source (questionnaires) and provided a generic critique of quantitative methods/positivist approaches - criticising lack of validity, etc. Candidates who answered in this way were credited so long as they explicitly highlighted the specific link between quantitative research methods and governmental-funded research, e.g. governmental-funded research tends to be quantitative to study society on a macro-scale.

For AO2, they would then be required to draw on findings from the study outlined in the source. For example, for those who answered this question strongly, they may draw on extracts from the source such as people in London feel their opportunities to progress were good (makes the government look favourable), or the 4,693-sample size (low response rate). Those who didn't answer this question adequately, would often simply pay lip service to the source. In other cases, even if they were able to identify problems, candidates often struggled to draw relevant material from the source to support their point.

Assessment for learning



Using previous source material, encourage candidates to identify where they can link aspects of it to a range of pre-set methodological issues, e.g. reliability, representativeness, ethical considerations, etc.

Exemplar 2

2	One problem with government-funded research is that it could lead to results being biased and altered to not portray the government in such an evil way. In source B, The Government published its 'Social Mobility Barometer', and showed that over half (56%) of all adults in the UK think that social inequality has increased as a result from Covid. The results may have been way higher but could have been reduced to 56% to not reduce people coming out at towards the government.
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Exemplar 2 demonstrates a problem with government-funded research in saying that it is biased and potentially altered to avoid the publication of statistics that make them look bad. The candidate then takes statistics from the source that makes the government look more favourable, implying they may be fabricated.

Question 3

- 3 With reference to **Source A**, explain **one** advantage and **one** disadvantage of using semi-structured interviews to understand the experience of upward social mobility.

[10]

The majority of candidates were able to identify one advantage and one disadvantage of using semi-structured interviews. The most common advantages focused on validity, rapport and verstehen. The most common disadvantages focused on sample size, representativeness and reliability. Candidates were able to explain these concepts. Good responses often considered how these issues impacted our understanding of how people experience social mobility. For example, gaining rapport with participants and learning their subjective feelings about social mobility has allowed for a greater and better understanding of the subject matter, which could even help provide advice and guidance to working class individuals looking to improve their social standing. However, some candidates were unable to fully develop their points.

For AO2, there were candidates still not using the source or simply repeating aspects of the question which does not gain marks. There were also candidates who paid lip service to the source by making generic references to participants, but to gain higher marks, these needed to be engaged with more specifically and used to illustrate the advantage or disadvantage being discussed.

For AO3, candidates needed to develop sociological evidence. Concepts need to be explained. For example, a candidate needs to demonstrate why semi-structured interviews lack reliability or why a lower level of representativeness is problematic to our understanding of the research context, as opposed to simply identifying the strength or weakness.

Misconception



A number of candidates chose to spend time describing what a semi-structured interview is before engaging in the question. No marks were given for this as it is not a requirement of the question. Furthermore, when this was done this would often cause candidates to go down the wrong path. In this instance, writing a generic summary of what a semi-structured interview is, led candidates to contradict the source. In usual circumstances a semi-structured interview may well generate quantitative data alongside qualitative, however in the research conducted by Evans & Wyatt, the source specifically states that only qualitative data was obtained. This meant that many candidates were making incorrect points, if they for example, claimed that an advantage of semi-structured interviews was that they provide both quantitative and qualitative data. It is important to read the source material carefully, to make sure that time is spent focusing on the specifics of the question, rather than attempting to fulfil expectations of a generic writing frame.

Question 4*

- 4* Using **Source B** and your wider sociological knowledge, explain and evaluate the use of questionnaires to collect quantitative data as a means of studying attitudes towards social class inequality in the UK. [25]

This question was reasonably well answered by the majority of candidates even though Level 4 for AO1 and AO3 was rarely reached. The best responses showed range (at least two strengths and two weaknesses of the use of qualitative methods for researching attitudes towards social class inequality) and depth (by showing clear understanding of theories and concepts in relation to each point). There were candidates who identified far more points than needed and therefore sacrificed the level or development of marks required for top level responses. Candidates who focused on four evaluation points tended to develop their points better, than those who wrote six or more.

For AO1, most candidates were able to use a range of methodological concepts and perspectives to support their responses such as interpretivism/positivism, reliability, validity, rapport, researcher imposition. A number of candidates confused positivism/interpretivism, quantitative/qualitative and validity/reliability.

For AO2, the most successful responses referred to the source and clearly applied accurate information from this to support each of the knowledge points. For example, when explaining how questionnaires can be used to generate large, representative samples, candidates referred to a 4,693-sample size and the fact that the research aimed to explore a range of identity-based criteria, e.g. age, gender, region, etc. Less successful responses did not make specific references to the source and instead paid lip service to it or applied the source but not specific to the point being made. For example, candidates may have claimed that a strength of questionnaires are their tendency to be reliable and then referred to the study's attempts to be representative towards different social groups.

For AO3, common strengths identified tended to centre on positivist theory and how such methods are objective, might produce more reliable data, or achieve representativeness and generalisability. Good responses on weaknesses tended to draw on interpretivist theory and considered lack of validity, rapport and verstehen. Some candidates discussed the problems created by lack of qualitative data. For example, not being able to understand the deeper reasons behind people's attitudes surrounding social class inequality despite obtaining a large amount of comparable data. Similarly to Question 3, less successful responses were unable to develop their evaluative points beyond often naming a range of concepts. Candidates did better if they focused their evaluation around one core point, rather than 'throw in' multiple concepts or points and not focus on any in particular. For example, candidates often write 'representativeness and generalisability', 'rapport and verstehen', 'objective and reliable', and then fail to go into any depth in explaining why these are relevant to the evaluation.

Some candidates attempted to cover theoretical, practical and ethical issues in their response. This is not required by the question or the mark scheme. Discussions of practical issues often lack theoretical or conceptual aspects, for example simply stating that 'questionnaires are quick and cheap'. Better responses link practical issues to concepts i.e. due to questionnaires being cheap to produce and relatively quick for participants to complete, sample sizes can be large, therefore increasing the representativeness and potential generalisability. Similarly, ethical issues outlined often lacked support from the source and were discussed in simplistic terms. For example, making assumptions such as the subject matter being emotionally harmful due to it focusing on a potentially triggering issues such as social class.

Misconception



A number of candidates make the common mistakes surrounding reliability and objectivity.

Objectivity

Several candidates made common errors in their understanding and application of the concept of objectivity. Many simply asserted that questionnaires are objective or provide objective data. While this reflects a general awareness of the positivist view of value freedom and the identification of objective facts, patterns, and trends, it is a misconception to assume that all questionnaire data is inherently objective.

It is incorrect to suggest that a questionnaire designed to measure public attitudes toward social class inequality (as was the case in Source B) produces objective data. Such a questionnaire collects the subjective opinions of respondents, and therefore the data is, by definition, subjective. Candidates would benefit from developing a more nuanced understanding of objectivity—acknowledging that while certain large-scale, government-funded questionnaires (such as the census) may gain objective data on variables like age, gender, occupation, and religious affiliation, attitude-based questionnaires do not. Teachers should encourage candidates to differentiate clearly between factual data and opinion-based responses when discussing objectivity.

Reliability

Most candidates correctly recognised that questionnaires can be considered reliable due to their use of closed questions and standardised formats, which allow for replication. However, a common misunderstanding was evident in the claim that this would result in the same answers or outcomes being obtained.

This represents a fundamental misinterpretation of reliability. In sociology, reliability refers to the consistency of the research method and its procedures—not to the expectation that identical results will be achieved from each respondent. Unlike experiments, questionnaires administered to a large and diverse sample are not expected to produce the same answers. Instead, reliability in this context depends on the consistent use of operationalised concepts and standardised procedures.

Candidates should be discouraged from making oversimplified statements about reliability and instead be encouraged to discuss how methodological features—such as question wording, format, and delivery—contribute to a method's reliability in sociological research. A more refined understanding of reliability in applied contexts is needed.

Key point

Candidates should focus on two strengths and two weaknesses.

Clearly signpost a new knowledge point, use a new paragraph for each strength and weakness.

For each point - focus on **one** core evaluative idea.

Engage with the source, make sure it is relevant and supports the knowledge point being discussed, explain how it supports the strength or weakness being discussed.

Candidates should use the source as a tool to guide their evaluation, rather than to support a preconceived or formulaic response—often shaped by over-reliance on rigid writing frames. For example, in some cases, candidates attempted to introduce ethical issues despite the source providing little or no basis for such a discussion. This suggests a pre-planned approach rather than a source-led response. As a result, candidates struggled to align their points with the content of the source, which frequently led to less successful application and, ultimately, the loss of AO2 marks.

Section B overview

This section has two compulsory questions. Both required candidates to use a wide range of sociological evidence and theory which needs to be fully developed to achieve Level 4. Overall, candidates were able to access both questions and include sociological evidence. The majority of candidates seemed to understand the requirements of both extended-response questions, suggesting that they were clear on the appropriate question technique. There were a full range of responses, where candidates gave less successful responses, illustrating difficulty in understanding the question and some candidates gave more successful responses, which scored very highly.

Question 5*

5* Outline ways in which gender inequalities still exist in work and employment in the UK today. [20]

This question was generally answered well by most candidates; however, Level 4 for AO1 and AO2 remained relatively uncommon. Although the question focused on a specific aspect of inequality—gender in the context of work and employment—many candidates were able to construct multiple points supported by relevant sociological concepts and evidence.

To reach Level 4, candidates were required to present four fully developed points that addressed at least two distinct aspects of workplace inequality. The most common approaches included discussions of pay gaps, occupational status, job satisfaction, sectoral segregation, and the division of conjugal roles. Weaker responses often attempted to bring in unrelated areas, such as education, media, or crime, which diverted from the core focus of the question.

There was a general awareness among candidates of the need to support arguments with substantiated evidence. However, several responses relied on anecdotal or common-sense assertions, lacking sociological foundation. The strongest responses clearly identified four relevant dimensions of contemporary gender inequality in the UK and supported each with well-developed paragraphs containing statistical data, empirical research, or findings from reputable organisations such as government bodies or third-sector reports.

Some candidates incorporated sociological theories and concepts with varying levels of success. Those who contextualised theoretical material with empirical evidence performed more strongly. For instance, references to the 'crisis of masculinity' were most effective when supported by data on male unemployment or underemployment. Similarly, the dual labour market theory was frequently mentioned but often described simplistically. Successful responses enhanced the analysis by linking the concept to current data showing the overrepresentation of women in low-paid, precarious work, particularly in sectors such as hospitality and health and social care. Failure to provide such depth of analysis, or to develop a full four points, often prevented candidates from reaching the top level.

A recurring issue was the inclusion of evidence from other spheres of social life—most notably the media—to explain workplace inequality. While a few candidates made these connections effectively, many struggled to draw clear and explicit links. For example, references to the 'male gaze' in media texts were often applied to workplace contexts without sufficient explanation. In contrast, stronger responses grounded this discussion in workplace-specific evidence, such as statistics on sexual harassment or references to contemporary movements like #MeToo.

Exemplar 3

Another aspect of workplace and employment in which gender inequalities are seen is in the fact that women make up a large majority of the world's working poor. The dual burden of housework and paid work (Delphy & Leonard) plays a key ^{role} ~~factor~~ in determining the quality of work employed by women. For example, there is a large increase of women and mothers on zero hour contracts. This is the epitome of workplace inequality. The Taylor Review of Modern Work practices found one sided flexibility on zero hour contracts, with employees feeling unable to assert their employee rights and experiencing unpredictable hours and insecure income. In addition to this, the Labour Force Survey in 2021 found that only 40% of those on zero hour contracts had wages that matched the 2021 living wage. This shows how inequality in the workplace is rooted in women's oppression.

Exemplar 3 illustrates an excellent approach to this question. The candidate clearly identifies the area of inequality in the opening sentence (women make up the working poor). They then refer to the concepts of dual burden and the work of Delphy & Leonard and then provide further evidence of women having higher numbers of zero hours contracts with substantiated statistics (The Taylor Review, Labour Force Survey 2021). This is a clear example of a developed paragraph for this question.

Question 6*

6* Assess Weberian explanations of social inequality.

[40]

This question was generally answered well by most candidates; however, achievement at Level 4 across AO1, AO2, and AO3 was relatively uncommon. Despite this, a significant number of candidates attained high marks.

Candidates were expected to produce eight fully developed points—four outlining distinct Weberian explanations of social inequality, and four critically assessing these explanations, often through reference to alternative theoretical perspectives.

For AO1, most candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of basic elements of Weber's theory, particularly class, status, and party. A minority were able to engage with more advanced elements of Weber's sociology, although such responses were rare. Many candidates successfully applied Weberian theory to various dimensions of inequality, including class, gender, ethnicity, and age.

Rather than focusing solely on Weber, candidates frequently drew on Neo-Weberian thinkers such as Rex and Tomlinson, Goldthorpe, Baron & Norris, and Parkin, with an emphasis on concepts such as social closure, market position, and status groups. While this approach was often effective, less successful responses tended to confuse core Weberian terms—e.g., misinterpreting 'party' as referring to political affiliation. A recurring issue was the blending of Weberian ideas with those from other perspectives, particularly Marxism, functionalism (especially meritocracy), feminism, and interactionism (e.g., labelling theory). This conflation often obscured the clarity of AO1 points and complicated the allocation of AO3 marks, as such responses lacked the theoretical precision required for higher levels.

For AO3, Evaluation was generally stronger. Many candidates were able to draw on a broad range of theoretical critiques. Common examples included Marxist critiques of Weber's approach to class, functionalist arguments around meritocracy and disengagement theory, New Right perspectives (e.g., Murray and Saunders) on dependency culture, feminist critiques of patriarchal structures, and postmodernist views on the fragmentation of class.

Stronger responses demonstrated clear theoretical links between AO1 and AO3. For example, a point discussing Rex and Tomlinson's work on ethnic inequality was effectively followed by a critique using Patterson's host-immigrant model. Similarly, where Baron and Norris' dual labour market theory was applied to gender inequality, high-scoring candidates used feminist critiques (e.g., Walby or Johnson) to highlight the limitations of the Weberian approach in addressing patriarchal underpinnings of labour market segregation. Weaker evaluation was often characterised by juxtaposition rather than clear engagement. Some candidates attempted to critique Weberian theory using sociological studies without a clear theoretical foundation, which limited their success in AO3.

Misconception



Several candidates made the mistake of identifying Bryan S. Turner as a functionalist. While it is correct to say that Turner engaged with functionalist ideas, he was not a supporter of them, and specifically not a proponent of meritocracy. His work criticises and mock's the idea of meritocracy in social life. Candidates should be encouraged to develop a more nuanced understanding of Turner.

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