

## Asking and Answering Sociological Questions



Evaluate the claim that both qualitative and quantitative research methods used in sociology are 'scientific'.

*This question asks you to reflect on what constitutes science and scientific method in sociological research. Two basic strategies for answering this question are available. One is narrowly focused and the other is more wide-ranging and therefore more risky.*

**The first and most straightforward** is to select one qualitative and one quantitative method – biographical research and social survey research perhaps – and explore each in the light of a definition of 'science' (described on pp.41-2). In this way the scene is set for an evaluation based on your chosen methods' approaches to data collection and analysis, logical assessment and systematic approach to empirical investigation.

Rather than remaining at a fairly abstract level of engagement with qualitative and quantitative methods, the essay might use actual pieces of real-world research to illustrate your arguments and make your points. To this end you could choose two contrasting research studies from anywhere in the book on subjects of interest to you and use these as concrete case studies which show that sociology's scientific credentials remain intact – or not – by comparing them with the key elements of a scientific approach as set out earlier.

**The second strategy** is rather more involved as a piece of reflection and essay writing. The question asks about science and sociology's status as a science, but debates in the sociology of science have called into question any simple and agreed definition of 'science' or scientific method. Hence, an answer to the question could draw on some of this debate, as described in Chapter 3's discussion of 'Positivism and Social Evolution' (pp.72-4) as well as throughout Chapter 1. Taking this debate as your starting point, a broader approach to the question would begin by 'questioning the question'. Just what is science anyway? Does science always have predictive power? Are the natural sciences themselves as 'scientific' as many people assume? Does the subject matter of the social sciences – people and societies – necessitate a different kind of scientificity? Clearly your answer to these matters determines how you will go about evaluating qualitative and quantitative methods.

Having adopted a broader frame for your answer, the way is then open for you to make use of various examples of research and alternative methods from across the qualitative and quantitative divides, perhaps including studies that have made use of mixed methods, to illustrate your arguments throughout.



This second strategy is more risky as it is possible to become bogged down in essentially philosophical debates on the nature of science itself. However, this can be successfully avoided through the use of specific examples, which help to keep the discussion within the realm of real-world sociological research.