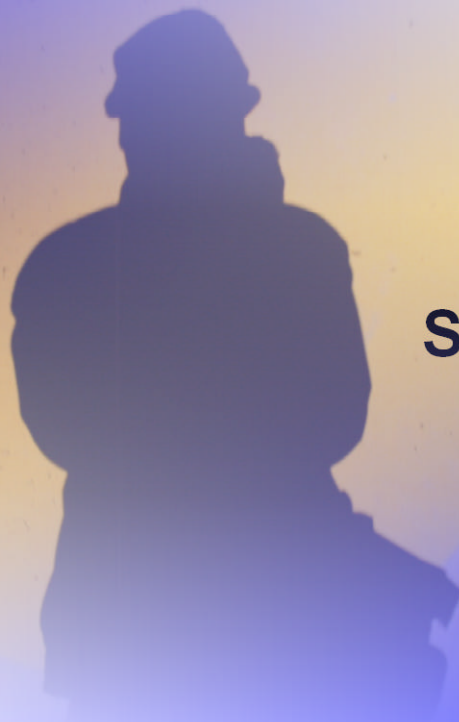


# AS Sociology



**Revision**

**Sociological  
Methods**

**“The relationship between Positivism,  
Interpretivism and sociological  
research methods”.**

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**Methodology**

**Positivism**

Positivism means “scientific” and positivist methodologies argue it’s possible and desirable to study social behaviour in ways similar to those used by natural scientists to study behaviour in the natural world.



**Systems**

A basic principle is that social systems consist of structures that exist independently of individuals; they represent behaviour at the institutional level of society and people experience structures as forces that push us to behave in ways that shape our individual behavioural choices.

**Example:** The rules of language structure the way we socially interact.

**Actions**

Study of the causes of behaviour (social structures) rather than their effects (the different choices people make). Structures are real and objective forces; although they can’t be seen, their effects can be (empirically) observed.

**Reality**

The forces shaping social behaviour can be discovered using similar methods to those used in sciences such as Physics - systematic observations that create highly reliable knowledge, organised and tested using something like **Popper’s** Hypothetico-Deductive model of research.

**Methods**

Quantitative methods are generally favoured because they allow for the collection of factual data.

**Objectivity**

The researcher should not directly interact with the people they are studying since this might influence their behaviour (non-participant observation is acceptable, but participant observation is more problematic).

**Facts**

For positivists, knowledge consists of identifying facts about how and why people behave as they do and, eventually, making connections between different facts to produce theories that explain behaviour.

**Reliability**

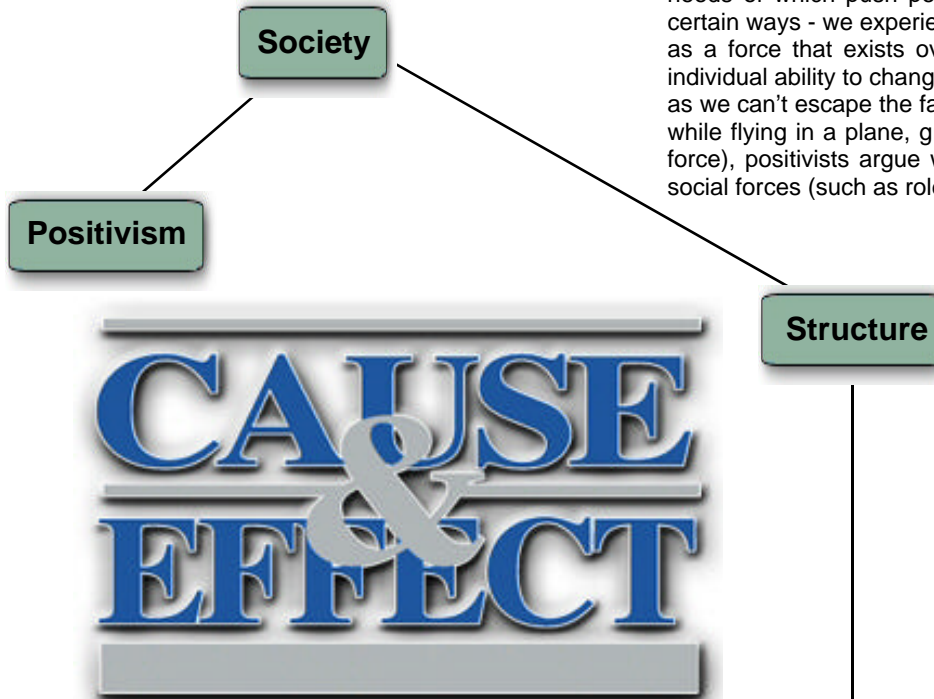
Methods such as questionnaires / structured interviews, experiments, comparative and observational studies are acceptable because they offer higher potential levels of reliability than qualitative methods.



The social world is similar to the natural world in terms of how it can be studied, because human behaviour is, determined by rules developed within social groups.

**Example:** The need to survive leads people to develop work groups and the need to socialise children leads people to develop family groups.

Because societies are social systems - the needs of which push people to behave in certain ways - we experience the social world as a force that exists over-and-above our individual ability to change or influence it. Just as we can't escape the fact of gravity (even while flying in a plane, gravity still exerts a force), positivists argue we cannot escape social forces (such as roles or norms).



# CAUSE & EFFECT

Science is concerned only with what is - rather than what we might want something to be - and scientists must be personally objective in their work (they don't get directly involved in the behaviour being studied; this avoids biasing or influencing the data collection process. The methods used should not depend on the subjective interpretations of a researcher and research should be capable of exact replication.

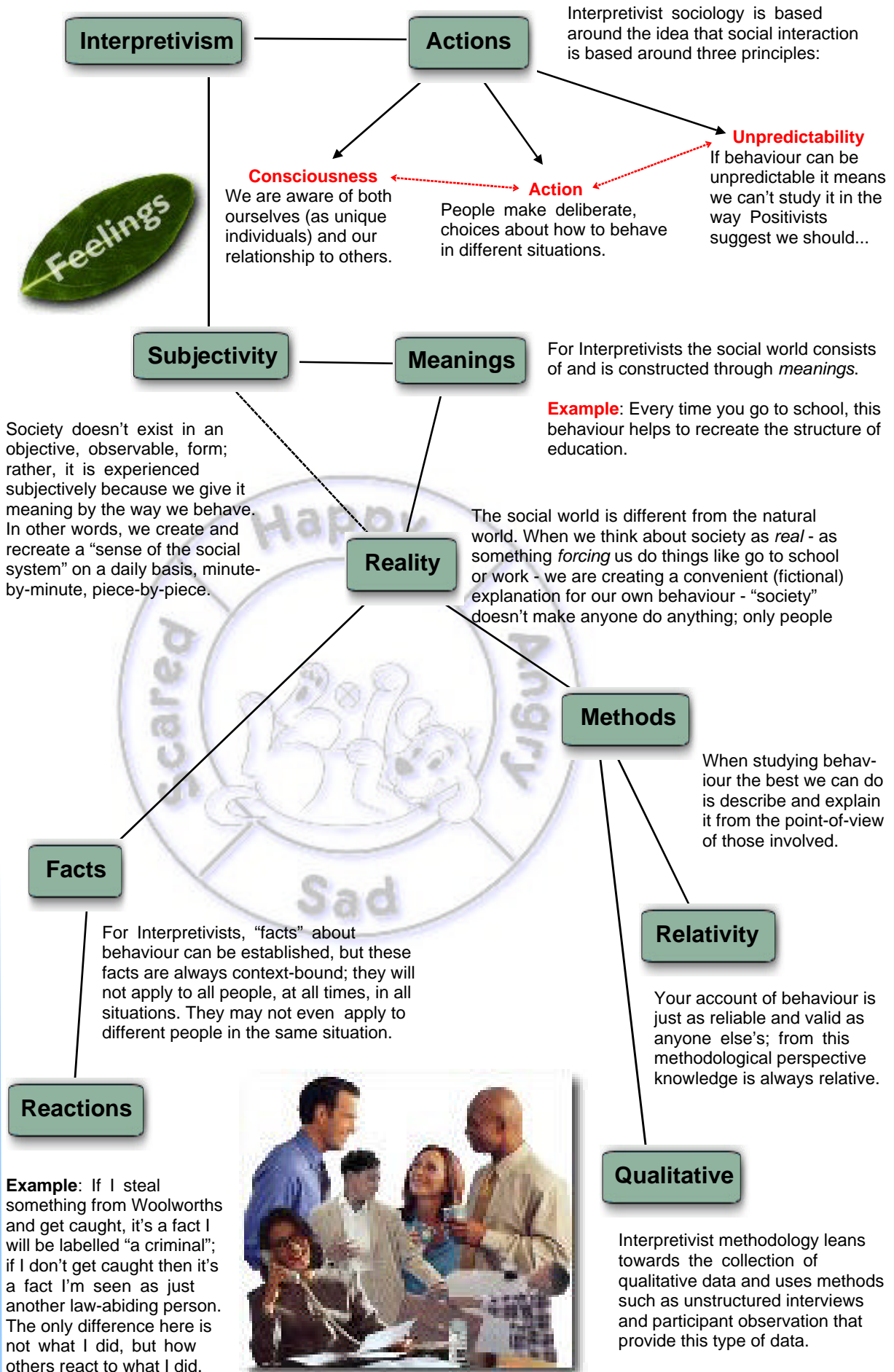
The task of (social) science is to isolate, analyse and understand the causes of human behaviour - and to understand how social forces shape behaviour we need to (systematically) study social groups rather than individuals.

Evidence about social behaviour is reliable and valid only if it is capable of being observed and tested. Anything not directly observable (such as people's thoughts) cannot be considered valid knowledge.



**Auguste Comte** (1798 - 1857) - the father of positivist thinking in Sociology

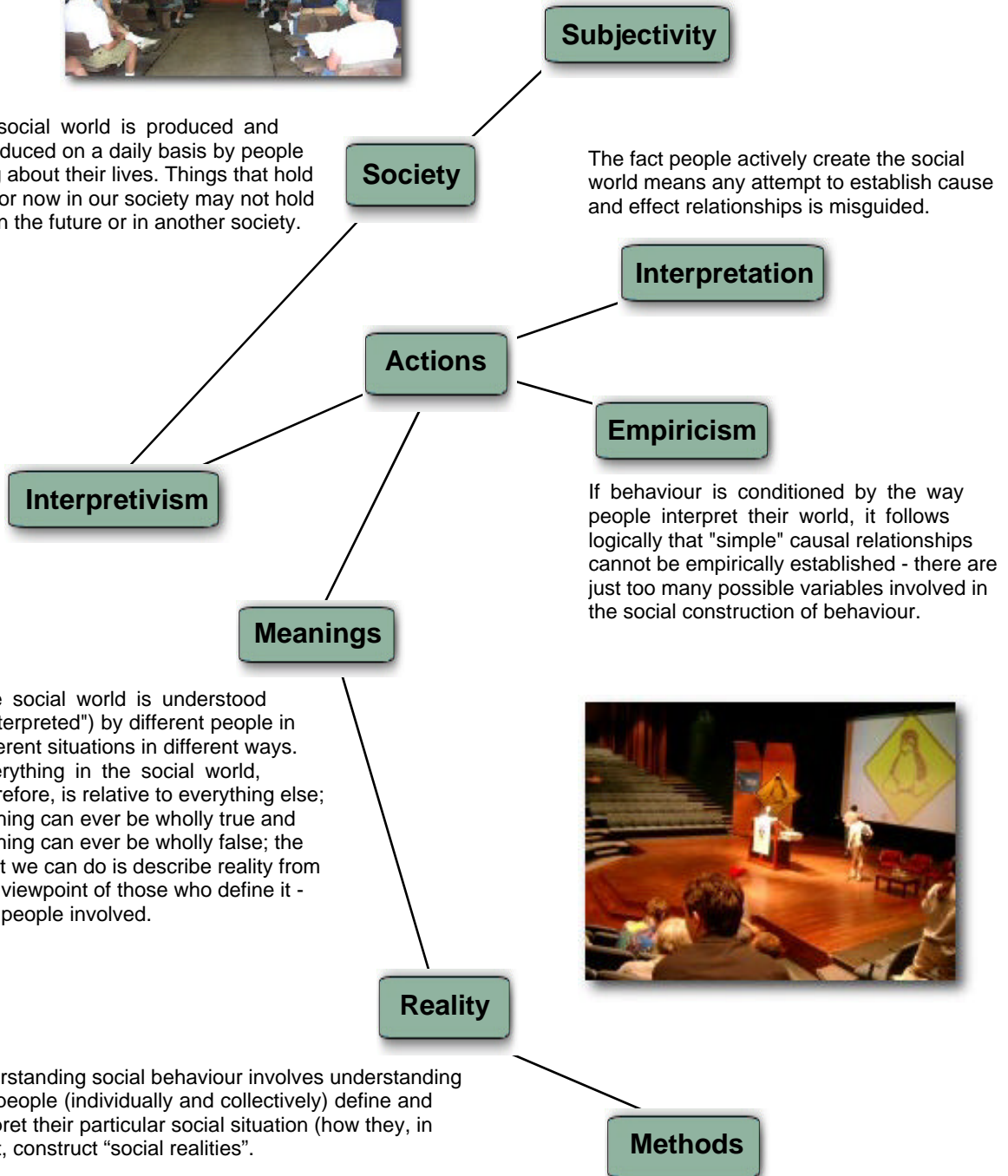
To reliably and validly study behaviour sociologists must use methods involving the use of our senses (sight, for example).





The social world has no objective features (or social structures) in the way Positivists understand these things. "Society" is experienced "as if" our behaviour were constrained by external forces and "social structures", therefore, are elaborate merely fictions we use to explain and justify behaviour.

The social world is produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. Things that hold true for now in our society may not hold true in the future or in another society.



The social world is understood ("interpreted") by different people in different situations in different ways. Everything in the social world, therefore, is relative to everything else; nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false; the best we can do is describe reality from the viewpoint of those who define it - the people involved.

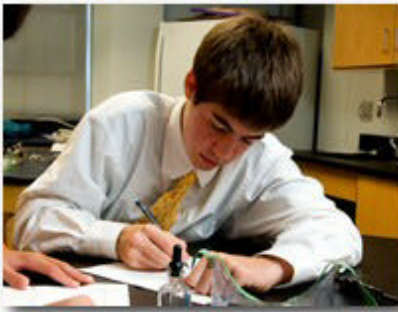
Understanding social behaviour involves understanding how people (individually and collectively) define and interpret their particular social situation (how they, in effect, construct "social realities").



The methods employed by a researcher (various forms of participant observation and interpretation) have to reflect the fact people consciously and unconsciously construct their own sense of social reality. Research methods, therefore, must be capable of capturing the quality of people's interpretations, definitions, meanings and understandings.

## Exam Questions

At AS level it seems unlikely that examiners will ask **direct** questions about sociological methodology (such as “Assess different methodological approaches” exam questions asked at A2 level).



However, what this means is that students have to recognise instances (usually in the higher mark AS questions) where it is appropriate to introduce methodological arguments and debates into the question.

For example, a question like:

“Using material from Item B and elsewhere, assess the usefulness of unstructured interviews to the sociologist. (20 marks)”

Invites the student to discuss some of the methodological reasons for some sociologists seeing unstructured interviews as a useful research method...



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