**Values =** are general guidelines about behaviour and right and wrong. For instance, Marxists will tend to believe that it is wrong for the rich to control the poor and Feminists believe that men and women should be equal.



**Arguments that sociology should be value-free**

* Many sociologists have argued that sociology should be factual, scientific and therefore independent of values.
* Comte, **Durkheim and Marx** all claimed to avoid values in their study of society. They argued that their approach was scientific (objective) and based on fact. Therefore, they argued that their approach was **value-free, or value neutral**.
* Durkheim in particular used quantitative methods that were detached and value-free, like official statistics. These methods enable **positivists** to keep their distance from their subjects, unlike interpretivist ones.
* As a result governments sometimes sought them out for advice on policies given that their findings were more scientific, although Durkheim was reluctant to work with governments because he thought their ideology would distort his research.

**Evaluation**

* Interpretivists would argue that it is not possible to have a value-free approach to Sociology.
* Moreover, for many (e.g. some Feminists) values are necessary if we are to improve society.

**Arguments that sociology should be value-laden** **(not value-free)**

* Weber was also interested in sociology and values. He argued that sociological research should also be value-free and objective when interpreting data. However he argued that **values were important** **when Sociologists chose which topics/subjects to investigate**. We chose topics to investigate that we are interested in. For instance, Feminists will choose to investigate topics relating to gender which male sociologists have neglected (e.g. McRobbie and portrayals of women in magazines) and Marxists those related to poverty. The gay sociologist Plummer has investigated sexuality in depth.
* Weber also saw values as important in attracting funding for research. If Sociologists carry out research that reflects a governments ideology (eg New Right for the Conservative government) or a charity’s (eg. homeless charities) they are more likely to be paid. If they work in the current government’s paradigm they also have better opportunities to advance their careers. If their research contradicts the values of the government that is funding them they can prevent publication.
* **Interpretivists** tend to use methods that involve the researcher more with the topic (eg unstructured interviews) and so make it harder to be value-free. Feminists in particular have used these interpretivist methods. For instance **Ann Oakley** carried out unstructured interviews with housewives, even famously helping them with their housework in order to build up a rapport. She argued that the normal **structured interview** technique was patriarchal because the (usually male) interviewer had power over the female subject. Clearly her feminist values affected her approach.
* **Committed sociology** argues that it is not possible to be objective and value-free, and nor is it desirable. The sociologist should be committed to a cause (e.g. Feminism) and research and make judgements in order to bring about change and improve society. This includes **critical sociologists** such as radical Feminists and Marxists who argue that positivist statistics are controlled by the hegemony.
* Examples of **committed sociology** would be feminists investigating the police’s treatments of sexual abuse victims to make them more sympathetic.
* **Becker** argued that committed sociologists needed to side with the “**underdogs”** in society, the oppressed, in order to improve their situation. This explains his work on how teachers label ethnic minority and working-class students.
* **Gouldner** agreed that sociology should be value-laden and seek to improve society, but argued that siding with the underdogs was pointless because they lacked the power to change society. His more radical approach instead argued that Sociologists should side with those who were **fighting back** against oppressors.

**Evaluation**

* Positivists would argue that the value-laden approach of some Marxists and Feminists makes their research too **subjective to have value**. They argued that Marxists and Feminists will always seek to find evidence of oppression by the bourgeoisie or men, whatever they study.