

# Bias Detective



Sociologists often try to carry out research carefully and fairly, but researchers may also bring assumptions, values and viewpoints into their work. Your task is to read three mock research extracts and look for signs of:

- bias
- subjectivity
- attempts at objectivity
- researcher effect

Your job

For each extract:

1. Read it carefully.
2. Highlight or underline:
  - evidence of bias
  - evidence of subjectivity
  - attempts at objectivity
  - possible researcher effect
3. Annotate the extract with answers to these questions:
  - What threatens validity?
  - What threatens reliability?
  - What might improve the study?

**You should look to answer the following questions for each extract**

- Where is there possible bias in this extract?
- Which parts suggest subjectivity?
- Where are there any attempts at objectivity?
- Is there any possible researcher effect?
- What threatens validity?
- What threatens reliability?
- How could the study be improved?

# Bias Detective



## Extract 1: Early Career Researcher Working with a Supervisor

### Background

An early career researcher is studying the reasons why working-class students may feel less confident about applying to university. They are working closely with a university supervisor who has already published research on educational inequality.

### Research Extract 1

“As part of my doctoral project, I interviewed twelve Year 13 students from one sixth form college in an area with traditionally low rates of university progression. My supervisor has done extensive work on class inequality in education and encouraged me to explore whether schools still reproduce middle-class advantage. I found this a very useful starting point because I had already suspected that many working-class students were being subtly discouraged from aiming high.

Before each interview, I explained to students that the project was about the barriers that stop talented young people from reaching university. I asked questions such as, ‘Do you feel teachers sometimes underestimate students like you?’ and ‘How far has a lack of family support held you back?’ Several students gave powerful answers. One student said, ‘People like us don’t really get pushed to succeed.’ Another said, ‘Teachers always seem to expect more from the rich kids.’

To ensure accuracy, I audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed them word-for-word. However, I focused mainly on the comments that best illustrated the hidden disadvantages faced by working-class students, as these were most relevant to the project aims. A small number of students said their teachers were supportive, but these comments were less revealing about the wider structural problem. The findings clearly show that class bias remains deeply embedded in schools and that schools continue to fail working-class learners.”

# Bias Detective



## Extract 2: Researcher Conducting Research for Government

### Background

A researcher has been commissioned by government to investigate whether a new behaviour policy in schools has improved discipline and standards.

### Research Extract 2

“This study was commissioned to assess the success of the government’s new school behaviour strategy. The research took place in six academies that had strongly embraced the policy and had already reported encouraging early results. In order to gather clear and efficient evidence, I used a short structured questionnaire with closed questions for staff and senior leaders. Questions included, ‘How much has behaviour improved since the introduction of the new strategy?’ and ‘How far has the policy helped create a calmer, more productive school environment?’

Most staff responded positively. One deputy head described the policy as ‘transformational’, while another said it had ‘finally brought discipline back into the classroom’. A teacher who felt the policy had increased exclusions was not included in the final report because her view was unusual and not representative of the wider trend. I remained professional throughout the study and used the same questionnaire for all participants in order to ensure consistency.

The evidence strongly suggests that the government’s strategy has had a highly positive effect on discipline, teacher confidence and school standards. It is likely that schools not yet using the policy would benefit from adopting it as quickly as possible.”

# Bias Detective



## Extract 3: Researcher Studying Age Inequalities in Welfare Benefits

### Background

A researcher is investigating whether older and younger adults are treated differently by welfare policy and public attitudes towards benefits.

### Research Extract 3

“My research explores the unfair way younger claimants are talked about compared with pensioners. I selected fifteen university students, eight young jobseekers and two campaigners from a youth charity to discuss their experiences of the welfare system. It quickly became obvious that younger people are routinely stigmatised, while older people are treated far more sympathetically. Several participants described benefit rules for under-25s as ‘punishing’ and ‘designed to blame us for being poor’.

In the focus groups, I encouraged participants to speak openly about the way society labels the young as lazy and irresponsible. At times, I shared my own frustration with media stereotypes in order to build rapport and create a more honest discussion. This helped participants open up, although some became increasingly angry as the session went on. One participant said, ‘Older people get respect, but we get judged like we’ve done something wrong.’ Another said, ‘The whole system is built against us.’

To strengthen the research, I included direct quotations and compared participant responses across the groups. These findings prove that welfare provision is shaped by age inequality and that younger adults are unfairly constructed as undeserving.”

# Bias Detective



## Teacher Indicative Content

### Extract 1: Early Career Researcher

#### Likely examples of bias

- The researcher already “suspected” that working-class students were being discouraged.
- The supervisor encouraged a particular line of enquiry about schools reproducing middle-class advantage.
- Questions are leading:
  - “Do teachers sometimes underestimate students like you?”
  - “How far has a lack of family support held you back?”
- The researcher says they focused mainly on comments that supported the argument.
- Supportive comments from some students are dismissed as “less revealing”.

#### Likely examples of subjectivity

- The project begins with assumptions about disadvantage.
- The interpretation is shaped by a structural/class inequality viewpoint.
- The wording “students like you” may imply a shared category and steer responses.

#### Attempts at objectivity

- Audio recording interviews
- Word-for-word transcription

#### Possible researcher effect

- Students may feel expected to describe barriers because the project is introduced as being about obstacles.
- The interviewer’s language may encourage students to frame answers negatively.

#### Threats to validity

- Leading questions may shape responses.
- Selective use of quotations may distort the overall picture.
- The narrow sample from one college limits wider understanding.

#### Threats to reliability

- Semi-structured or open interviews may be difficult to repeat consistently.
- Heavy interpretation may mean another researcher would draw different conclusions.

#### Improvements

- Use less leading questions
- Include a wider range of schools
- Report contradictory evidence as well as supporting evidence
- Use triangulation with observation, questionnaires or official data



# Bias Detective



## Teacher Indicative Content

### Extract 2: Government Researcher

#### Likely examples of bias

- The research is commissioned by government, which may influence the purpose of the study.
- Only six academies that had already embraced the policy were chosen.
- Questions are clearly leading:
  - “How much has behaviour improved...?”
  - “How far has the policy helped create a calmer... environment?”
- A critical teacher’s view was excluded from the final report.
- The conclusion goes beyond the evidence by recommending wider adoption.

#### Likely examples of subjectivity

- The language “encouraging early results” frames the policy positively before the findings are discussed.
- The selection of schools appears one-sided and may reflect political priorities.

#### Attempts at objectivity

- Structured questionnaire
- Same questionnaire for all participants
- Standardisation and consistency

#### Possible researcher effect

- Staff may feel pressure to present the policy positively, especially if they know it is government commissioned.
- Senior leaders may want their school to appear successful.

#### Threats to validity

- One-sided sampling
- Leading questions
- Excluding negative evidence
- Responses may reflect pressure rather than genuine views

#### Threats to reliability

- The structured format may improve reliability, but excluding some evidence undermines overall trustworthiness.
- A repeat study in a different set of schools may give very different results.

#### Improvements

- Include schools with mixed or negative experiences
- Ask neutral questions
- Include dissenting responses
- Combine questionnaires with interviews and exclusion data
- Be transparent about funding and limitations

# Bias Detective



## Teacher Indicative Content

### Extract 3: Welfare and Age Inequality Researcher

Likely examples of bias

- The researcher begins with the belief that younger claimants are treated unfairly.
- The sample is heavily focused on young people and youth campaigners.
- No older claimants are included.
- The researcher shares their own frustration with stereotypes.
- The conclusion says the findings “prove” age inequality, which is too strong.

Likely examples of subjectivity

- Emotionally charged wording:
  - “unfair”
  - “punishing”
  - “designed to blame us”
- The researcher appears morally committed to the issue.
- The approach reflects committed sociology.

Attempts at objectivity

- Use of direct quotations
- Comparing responses across groups

Possible researcher effect

- Sharing personal frustration may influence participants.
- Encouraging open discussion about stigma may push the group in a particular direction.
- Participants becoming more angry suggests the researcher may be shaping the tone.

Threats to validity

- Very one-sided sample
- Lack of comparison with older claimants
- Researcher involvement may influence what participants say
- Focus groups may encourage group conformity

Threats to reliability

- Emotional and open-ended group discussions are difficult to replicate
- Researcher influence may vary from group to group

Improvements

- Include older claimants and a wider range of participants
- Avoid revealing personal views during the discussion
- Use more neutral prompts
- Combine focus groups with policy analysis or survey data
- Avoid over-claiming what the evidence shows
-