



HAMPSTEAD SCHOOL

Learning together Achieving together

Y12 – Y13

Summer Bridging Tasks

2023

A Level Sociology

Name: _____

- You should spend some time during the summer holidays working on the activities in this booklet.
- You will be required to hand in this booklet in your first lesson at the start of Year 12 and the content will be used to form the basis of your first assessments.
- You should try your best and show commitment to your studies.

Y12 Sociology Summer Work

Introduction to Y13 Sociology

In preparation for Y13, we want you to do some reading and note taking to give you a strong understanding of the Theory and Methods part of the course.

Tasks:

1. Read the chapters attached with this (if you haven't done these already).
 - Topic 3 Sociology and Science
 - Topic 4 Objectivity and Values
 - Topic 10 Sociology and Social Policy

Write a minimum of half a page of notes on this.

2. Watch one of these lectures on Social Theories.

<https://oyc.yale.edu/sociology/socy-151/lecture-22>

<https://oyc.yale.edu/sociology/socy-151/lecture-23>

<https://oyc.yale.edu/sociology/socy-151/lecture-13>

Write a minimum of half a page of notes on this.

3. Listen to this podcast on 'The Changing Nature of Crime'.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000z6d2>

Write a minimum of half a page of notes on this.

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy is generally thought of as the plans and actions of governments to tackle 'social problems', especially the welfare of the population in areas such as education and health. Many sociologists are interested in solving social problems and much of their research produces policy proposals for government to act upon.

In this Topic, we examine the relationship between sociology and social policy. For example:

- Should it be the job of sociologists to influence social policies?
- What kinds of policies do different perspectives favour?
- How far does sociological research actually influence policies?

Social problems and sociological problems

In order to understand the role of sociology in relation to social policy, it is useful to distinguish first between social problems and sociological problems.

Social problems

According to Peter Worsley (1977), 'a social problem is some piece of social behaviour that causes public friction and/or private misery and calls for collective action to solve it'.

For example, poverty, educational underachievement, juvenile delinquency and divorce may all be seen as social problems by members of society, and governments may be called upon to produce policies to tackle them.

Sociological problems

According to Worsley, a sociological problem is 'any pattern of relationships that calls for explanation'. In other words, it is any piece of behaviour that we wish to make sense of.

This might be something that society regards as a social problem, for example why some people are poor or commit crime. But it can also include behaviour that society doesn't normally regard as a problem – for example, why people are prosperous or law-abiding. As Worsley puts it:

'From the point of view of the State or the neighbours, quiet families are not problem families. Sociologically speaking, they are.'

In other words, 'normal' behaviour is just as interesting to sociologists as behaviour that people see as a social problem. In fact, some sociologists show little or no interest in solving social problems. They see their goal as being to discover knowledge for its own sake.

On the other hand, many sociologists are interested in solving social problems through their research. For example, sociologists who feel strongly about poverty have conducted research aimed at discovering solutions. Similarly, many sociologists are employed directly by government departments such as the Home Office. These sociologists often have a direct input into making policies and evaluating their effectiveness, for example in reducing crime.

Application

Suggest three examples of behaviour that are usually regarded as normal rather than as problems. Why might sociologists be interested in them?

The influence of sociology on policy

However, even when sociologists do conduct research into social problems, there is no guarantee that policy-makers will study their findings, or that any solutions they propose will find their way into social policies. Many factors may affect whether or not sociological research succeeds in influencing policy:

- **Electoral popularity** Research findings and recommendations might point to a policy that would be unpopular with voters.
- **Ideological and policy preferences of governments** If the researcher's value-stance or perspective is similar to the political ideology of the government, they may stand more chance of influencing its policies.
- **Interest groups** These are pressure groups that seek to influence government policies in their own interests. For

example, business groups may succeed in persuading government not to raise the minimum wage, even though this might reduce poverty.

- **Globalisation** Social policy isn't just made by nation states in isolation. International organisations such as the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may influence the social policies of individual governments. For example, the IMF's 'structural adjustment programmes' have required less developed countries to introduce fees for education and health care as a condition for aid, despite evidence from social scientists that this makes development less likely.
- **Critical sociology** Sociologists who are critical of the state and powerful groups, such as Marxists, may be

regarded as too extreme, hostile or impractical and therefore unlikely to influence policy.

- **Cost** Even if the government is sympathetic to the sociologist's findings, it may not have sufficient funds to implement an appropriate policy based on them, or it may have other spending priorities and commitments.
- **Funding sources** In some cases, sociologists may tone down their findings and policy recommendations so as to fit in with their paymasters' wishes – a case of 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. Similarly, policymakers may recruit sociologists who share their assumptions and political values. The research findings may then be used to justify what the policymakers intended to do in the first place. Similarly, 'think tanks' or research institutes often have particular political sympathies – for example, some are seen as left leaning, while others have right-wing sympathies. Politicians seeking a particular result to justify their favoured policies can be selective in which think tanks they turn to for research.

In addition to any direct influence on policymakers, social scientists' ideas sometimes become part of mainstream culture and influence the way people see social problems.

This in turn can affect the policies that governments produce. For example, John Bowlby's (1965) idea that young children's relationships with their mother are crucial for normal development became widely accepted by many people. When this happens, it can influence the climate of opinion in favour of policies that reflect these social science-derived ideas. In the example above, it may have influenced policies on day care, young offenders and so on.

The power to define the problem

Sociological research is thus only one possible element in shaping social policy. Ultimately, any policy is the result of a political decision by those in power. As Tom Burden (1998) says, social policies:

'cannot be very well understood if they are simply treated as "neutral" attempts to deal with "problems". Indeed, what is to count as a problem is itself generally a matter of political debate.'

Often, those with power are the ones who are able to define what is and what is not a problem, and what if anything should be done about it.

Perspectives on social policy and sociology

Different sociological perspectives hold different views of the nature of the state and the social policy it produces. As a result, each perspective tends to take a different view of the role of sociology in relation to social policy. We shall now examine the major perspectives on policy and its relationship to sociology.

Positivism and functionalism

Early positivists such as Comte and Durkheim took the view that sociology was a science and would discover both the cause of social problems and scientifically based solutions to them. As such, their approach was part of the Enlightenment project to use science and reason to improve society. For example, Durkheim's analysis led him to propose a meritocratic education system and the abolition of inherited wealth as ways to foster a sense that society was fair, which would promote social cohesion.

Functionalists see society as based on value consensus and free from fundamental conflicts. Like the positivists, they see the state as serving the interests of society as a whole, producing and implementing rational social policies for the good of all. These policies help society run more smoothly and efficiently. For example, educational policies are seen as promoting equal opportunity and social integration, while health and housing policies assist the family in performing its functions more effectively.

For both functionalists and positivists, the sociologist's role is to provide the state with objective, scientific information. By investigating social problems and discovering their causes, sociologists provide the necessary information on which the state can base its policies.

In this view, the sociologist is rather like the medical researcher. Just as medical research discovers the causes of disease as a basis for prevention or cure, so the sociologist's role is to investigate social problems scientifically. This provides the state with objective information about their extent and explanations of their causes as well as possible 'cures' in the shape of policy recommendations.

Functionalists favour social policies that are sometimes referred to as 'piecemeal social engineering'. In other words, they favour a cautious approach, tackling one specific issue at a time.

However, the piecemeal approach has been criticised. For example, Marxists argue that educational policies aimed at equalising opportunity for children of different classes are often defeated by the influence of poverty in wider society. In other words, social problems such as underachievement are simply aspects of a wider structure of class inequality, and so we need to change the basic structure of society in order to solve these specific problems.

The social democratic perspective

The social democratic perspective on social policy shares this view. It favours a major redistribution of wealth and income from the rich to the poor. Sociologists adopting this perspective, such as Peter Townsend (1979), argue that they should be involved in researching social problems and making policy recommendations to eradicate them. For example, Townsend conducted research on poverty. On the basis of his findings, he made recommendations for policies such as higher benefit levels, and more public spending on health, education and welfare.

Similarly, the Black Report (1980) on class inequalities in health made 37 far-reaching policy recommendations for reducing these deep-rooted inequalities. These included free school meals for all children, improved working conditions and more spending to improve housing. The Labour government had originally commissioned the report in 1977 but it was only completed in 1980, the year after Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government came to power. Her government refused to implement the report's recommendations on grounds of cost, and tried to restrict its publication.

Criticisms

Marxists criticise the social democratic perspective. While they agree that social problems such as class inequalities in health are deep-rooted, they reject the idea that even policies as far-reaching as those proposed by the Black Report are enough to solve the problem. In their view, it is capitalism that is ultimately responsible for these inequalities and so the problem cannot be solved without abolishing capitalism. They also argue that in any event, as the government response to the Black Report showed, the capitalist state is unlikely to introduce costly public spending policies to benefit the working class. Thus, rational social policies proposed by sociologists such as Townsend will fall on deaf ears as far as policymakers are concerned.

From a different perspective, postmodernists criticise attempts by sociologists to influence policy. For postmodernists, it is impossible to discover objective truth. All knowledge produced by research is uncertain, and so sociological findings cannot provide a satisfactory basis for policy-making. In this view, sociologists can only take the role of 'interpreters', offering one view of reality among many, and not the role of 'legislators' (lawmakers), as modernist sociologists such as functionalists and social democrats have tried to do.

Marxism

Marxists see society as divided by a fundamental conflict of interest in which the ruling capitalist class exploits the labour of the working class. Unlike functionalists, they do not see the state and its policies as benefiting all members of

society. In the Marxist view, the state represents the ruling class, and its social policies serve the interests of capitalism, not those of society as a whole:

- **Policies provide ideological legitimisation** to mask capitalist exploitation. For example, the welfare state gives capitalism a 'human face', making it appear that the system cares about the poor, sick and old.
- **They maintain the labour force for further exploitation** For example, the NHS serves capitalism by keeping workers fit enough to work.
- **They are a means of preventing revolution** when class conflict intensifies and threatens the stability of capitalism. For example, Marxists see the policies that created the welfare state after the Second World War (1939-45) as a way of buying off working-class opposition to capitalism.

Marxists recognise that social policies do sometimes provide real, if limited, benefits to the working class. However, such gains are constantly threatened with reversal by capitalism's tendency to go into periodic crises of profitability, leading to cuts in state spending on welfare.

Therefore, research that reveals the unpleasant truth about the social problems capitalism creates will not be used to formulate policies to solve these problems – as the fate of the Black Report shows. In fact, for Marxists, such problems cannot be solved by the capitalist state in any case, since capitalism is based on putting profits before human needs. The only solution to social problems is a revolution to overthrow capitalism and create a classless society.

For Marxists, therefore, the sociologist's main role should be to criticise capitalist social policy, not to serve the capitalist state. The sociologist must reveal the exploitation that underpins capitalism, and the way in which the ruling class use social policies to mask this exploitation and buy off revolt with minor concessions.

However, critics argue that Marxist views on social policy and the role of sociologists are impractical and unrealistic. Social democrats criticise them for rejecting the idea that research can help bring about progressive policies within the capitalist system. For example, poverty researchers have at times had some positive impact on policy.

Feminism

Like Marxists, feminists see society as based on conflict, but in their view the fundamental conflict is between genders, not classes. Society is patriarchal (male dominated), benefiting men at women's expense, and the state perpetuates women's subordination through its social policies.

For example, family policies may assume that the 'normal' family is a conventional nuclear family with a heterosexual married couple. Thus, if the state assumes this and offers benefits to married couples but not to cohabiting ones,

CHAPTER 3

these policies may produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging the kind of family that the state assumed to be the norm in the first place and making it more difficult for people to live in other kinds of family.

Feminist research has had an impact in a number of policy areas. For example, in education, it has influenced policies such as learning materials that promote more positive images of females and training to sensitise teachers to the need to avoid gender bias.

Many of these policies reflect the liberal feminist view that anti-discrimination reforms will ultimately bring about gender equality.

On the other hand, radical feminist ideas have also had some influence on social policy. Radical feminists regard men as the direct oppressors of women, especially through the family. They therefore favour *separatism* – the idea that women need to separate themselves from men to be free from patriarchy. One policy that reflects this is *refuges for women escaping domestic violence*. For example, the Women's Aid Federation supports a national network of over 500 such services, often with funding from government.

Overall, it is clear that feminist sociological research has had some impact on social policies in areas that affect women, in part due to the success of the broader feminist movement in gaining greater political influence since the 1970s. However, many feminists reject the view that reformist social policies can liberate women. For example, both Marxist and radical feminists call for more far-reaching changes that the existing state cannot deliver.

The New Right

The New Right believe that the state should have only minimal involvement in society. In particular, they are opposed to using state provision of welfare to deal with social problems. In their view, state intervention in areas such as family life, income support, education and health care robs people of their freedom to make their own choices and undermines their sense of responsibility. This in turn leads to greater social problems, such as crime and delinquency.

For example, Charles Murray (1984) argues that generous welfare benefits act as 'perverse incentives' that weaken the family's self-reliance. They encourage the growth of a dependency culture and an underclass of lone mothers, undisciplined children, and irresponsible fathers who abandon their families. For this reason, Murray favours a reduction in state spending on welfare.

The New Right are therefore highly critical of many existing policies. However, they are not opposed to social policy as such, and they see the role of sociologists as being to propose alternative policies. These policies should aim to restore individuals' responsibility for their own welfare, rather than leaving it to the state.

For example, *Breakdown Britain*, a report by Conservative think tank, the Social Justice Policy Group (2007), proposes a range of new social policies aimed at the family. These include marriage preparation and parenting classes, and support from the tax and benefit system for mothers who stay at home. The report's main thrust is that governments have stripped citizens of responsibility for their own welfare and neglected the support networks that give people their quality of life. The role of social policy should be to enable people to help themselves, rather than the welfare state attempting, and failing, to do it for them.

Influence of New Right thinking

Because of its ideological opposition to the state having a major role in welfare, New Right thinking has tended to be particularly attractive to the Conservative Party. However, some Labour policies have shown the influence of New Right views. For example, New Labour regards a married couple as normally the best place to bring up children.

While not seeing a major role for the state in welfare, the New Right support a strong 'law and order' policy and research by right realists such as Wilson and Kelling has been influential in introducing zero tolerance policies.

However, the research used by the New Right has been questioned. For example, the validity of the data on which Murray bases his claims about a link between absent fathers and delinquency has been challenged. Similarly, New Right policy proposals often use the findings of politically sympathetic think tanks.

Activity

Discussion

Differing perspectives on policy

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Topic Summary

Sociologists often research social problems, but many other factors influence policies. **Positivists and functionalists** see sociology as providing objective knowledge to guide policy for the good of society. **Social democrats** see sociology as proposing policies to make major structural changes, such as the abolition of poverty. **Marxists** argue that sociology must remain critical of the policies of the capitalist state. **Feminists** see policy as reflecting patriarchy and use research to influence policy in favour of women. The **New Right** propose policies to tackle the culture of dependency.



We can use scientific methods to study rocks, plants and animals – but can we use the same methods to study people?

GETTING STARTED

Working in groups of three or four, answer the following:

- 1 Suggest some reasons why science is a compulsory core subject in schools.
- 2 Suggest reasons why some sociologists want to model their work on natural sciences.
- 3 Do you think sociology should aim to be scientific? Give reasons for your answer.

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Know the difference between positivist and interpretivist views of whether sociology can be a science and be able to apply this to the issue of suicide.
- Know a range of views on natural science and their implications for sociology as a science.
- Be able to evaluate the arguments for and against the view that sociology can or should be a science.

SOCIOLOGY AND SCIENCE

Science is a central feature of today's society. Science and technology have revolutionised practically every aspect of life, from living standards and healthcare to communications and warfare.

As we saw in the Introduction to this chapter, science was central to the 18th century Enlightenment project. Enlightenment thinkers were deeply impressed by the success of science in explaining and controlling nature.

They believed that the natural sciences would produce true, objective knowledge of the world around us, and that this would be used for progress and human betterment, for example by eradicating disease and hunger. Science would be the cornerstone of modern society.

The success of science also made a powerful impression on the 19th century modernist sociologists such as Comte, Durkheim and Marx. They sought to copy its success by producing a science of society. Just as the natural sciences enabled us to control nature, sociology would bring true knowledge of society that could be used to eradicate problems such as poverty, injustice and conflict. It seemed that sociologists simply needed to borrow the methods of the natural sciences, and success would be sure to follow.

Since then, however, others have argued that it is not possible or desirable for sociology to model itself on the natural sciences. In this Topic, we examine two related debates:

- Can and should sociology be a science?
- What is science, and what implications does this have for sociology?

Positivism

The 'founding fathers' of sociology in the 19th century were very impressed by the success of science in explaining the natural world and providing the knowledge with which humans could extend their control over nature. Many of these sociologists, such as Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who coined the term 'sociology', described themselves as 'positivists'.

Positivists believe that it is possible and desirable to apply the logic and methods of the natural sciences to the study of society. Doing so will bring us true, objective knowledge of the same type as that found in the natural sciences. This will provide the basis for solving social problems and achieving progress.

A key feature of the positivist approach is the belief that reality exists outside and independently of the human mind:

- Nature is made up of objective, observable, physical facts, such as rocks, cells, stars etc, which are external to our minds and which exist whether we like it or not.
- Similarly, society is an objective factual reality – it is a real 'thing' made up of social facts that exists 'out there', independently of individuals, just like the physical world.

Patterns, laws and inductive reasoning

For positivists, reality is not random or chaotic but patterned, and we can observe these empirical (factual) patterns or regularities – for example, that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius. It is the job of science to observe, identify, measure and record these patterns systematically – preferably through laboratory experiments – and then to explain them.

Positivists believe, in Durkheim's words, that 'real laws are discoverable' that will explain these patterns. Just as physicists have discovered laws that govern the workings of nature, such as the law of gravity, sociologists can discover laws that determine how society works. The method for doing so is known as *induction*, or inductive reasoning.

Induction involves accumulating data about the world through careful observation and measurement. As our knowledge grows, we begin to see general patterns. For example, we may observe that objects, when dropped, always fall towards the earth at the same rate of acceleration.

Verificationism

From this, we can develop a *theory* that explains all our observations so far. After many more observations have confirmed or verified the theory, we can claim to have discovered the truth in the form of a general *law*. In our example above, we can confirm the existence of a universal law of gravity. Because inductive reasoning claims to verify a theory – that is, prove it true – this approach is also known as *verificationism*.

For positivists, the patterns we observe, whether in nature or in society, can all be explained in the same way – by finding the facts that cause them. For example, physics explains an apple falling to the ground (one fact) in terms of gravity (another fact). Similarly, in sociology we might explain the social fact of educational failure in terms of another social fact such as material deprivation.

Positivist sociologists thus seek to discover the causes of the patterns they observe. Like natural scientists, they aim to produce general statements or scientific laws about how



▲ Japanese kamikaze suicide pilots, 1945. Their 'sacred mission' was to crash their planes into US warships.

society works. These can then be used to predict future events and to guide social policies. For example, if we know that material deprivation causes educational failure, we can use this knowledge to develop policies to tackle it.

Positivists favour 'macro' or structural explanations of social phenomena, such as functionalism and Marxism. This is because macro theories see society and its structures as social facts that exist outside of us and shape our behaviour patterns.

Objective quantitative research

Positivists believe that as far as possible sociology should take the experimental method used in the natural sciences as the model for research, since this allows the investigator to test a hypothesis in the most systematic and controlled way. (A hypothesis is a statement such as 'A causes B'.) Basically, experiments involve examining each possible causal factor to observe its effect, while simultaneously excluding all other factors.

Like natural scientists, positivists use quantitative data to uncover and measure patterns of behaviour. This allows them to produce mathematically precise statements about the relationship between the facts they are investigating. By analysing quantitative data, positivists seek to discover the laws of cause and effect that determine behaviour.

Positivists believe that researchers should be detached and objective. They should not let their own subjective feelings, values or prejudices influence how they conduct their research or analyse their findings. In the natural sciences, it is claimed that the scientist's values and opinions make no difference to the outcome of their research. For example, water boils at 100 degrees Celsius whether the scientist likes that fact or not.

However, in sociology we are dealing with people, and there is a danger that the researcher may 'contaminate' the research – for example, by influencing interviewees to answer in ways that reflect the researcher's opinions rather than their own. Positivists therefore employ methods that allow for maximum objectivity and detachment, and so they use quantitative methods such as questionnaires, structured interviews and official statistics. These methods also produce reliable data that can be checked by others.

Analysis and Evaluation

- 1 How might scientists test for the effect of light on plants? What variables (factors) would they need to control?
- 2 Compare this with the task of measuring the effect of material deprivation on educational achievement. What variables would be difficult to control?

Positivism and suicide

Emile Durkheim (1897) chose to study suicide to show that sociology was a science with its own distinct subject matter. He believed that if he could prove that even such a highly individual act had social causes, this would establish sociology's status as a genuinely scientific discipline.

Using quantitative data from official statistics, Durkheim observed that there were patterns in the suicide rate. For example, rates for Protestants were higher than for Catholics. He concluded that these patterns could not be the product of the motives of individuals, but were social facts. As such, they must be caused by other social facts – forces acting upon members of society to determine their behaviour.

According to Durkheim, the social facts responsible for determining the suicide rate were the levels of integration and regulation. Thus, for example, Catholics were less likely than Protestants to commit suicide because Catholicism was more successful in integrating individuals.

Thus Durkheim claimed to have discovered a 'real law': that different levels of integration and regulation produce different rates of suicide. He claimed to have demonstrated that sociology had its own unique subject matter – social facts – and that these could be explained scientifically.

Interpretivism

Interpretivist sociologists do not believe that sociology should model itself on the natural sciences. Interpretivists criticise positivism's 'scientific' approach as inadequate or even as completely unsuited to the study of human beings.

The subject matter of sociology

Interpretivists argue that the subject matter of sociology is meaningful social action, and that we can only understand it by successfully interpreting the meanings and motives of the actors involved. Interpretivists say sociology is about unobservable internal meanings, not external causes. In their view, sociology is not a science, because science only deals with laws of cause and effect, and not human meanings.

Because of this, many interpretivists completely reject the use of natural science methods and explanations as a model for sociology. They argue that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and that of sociology.

- **Natural science** studies matter, which has no consciousness. As such, its behaviour can be explained as a straightforward reaction to an external stimulus. For example, an apple falls to the ground because of the force of gravity. It has no consciousness, and no choice about its behaviour.
- **Sociology** studies people, who do have consciousness. People make sense of and construct their world by attaching meanings to it. Their actions can only be understood in terms of these meanings, and meanings are internal to people's consciousness, not external stimuli – they are ideas or constructs, not things.

Unlike matter, people have free will and can exercise choice. As G.H. Mead argued, rather than responding automatically to external stimuli, human beings interpret the meaning of a stimulus and then *choose* how to respond to it.

For example, on seeing a red light, a motorist must first interpret it as meaning 'stop'. Even then, this does not determine their behaviour, since they could still choose either to obey the signal or jump the light. How they act will depend on the meaning they give to the situation – for example, escaping a pursuing police car, avoiding a collision etc.

Thus, when motorists stop at a red light, it is not because there is some force outside them determining their behaviour. It is because they understand and interpret the rule concerning the meaning of red traffic lights, and because they then choose to act in accordance with it.

For interpretivists, then, individuals are not puppets on a string, manipulated by supposed external 'social facts', as positivists believe, but autonomous (independent) beings

who construct their social world through the meanings they give to it. The job of the sociologist therefore is to uncover these meanings.

Verstehen and qualitative research

Interpretivists therefore reject the logic and methods of the natural sciences. They argue that to discover the meanings people give to their actions, we need to see the world from their viewpoint. For interpretivists, this involves abandoning the detachment and objectivity favoured by positivists. Instead, we must put ourselves in the place of the actor, using what Weber calls *verstehen* or empathetic understanding to grasp their meanings.

For this reason, interpretivists favour the use of qualitative methods and data such as participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents. These methods produce richer, more personal data high in validity and give the sociologist a subjective understanding of the actor's meanings and life-world.

Types of interpretivism

All interpretivists seek to understand actors' meanings. However, they are divided about whether or not we can combine this understanding with positivist-style causal explanation of human behaviour.

Interactionists believe that we can have causal explanations. However, they reject the positivist view that we should have a definite hypothesis before we start our research. For example, Glaser and Strauss (1968) argue that this risks imposing our own view of what is important, rather than taking the actors' viewpoint, so we end up distorting the reality we are seeking to capture.

Instead, Glaser and Strauss favour a 'bottom-up' approach, or *grounded theory*. Rather than entering the research with a fixed hypothesis from the start (when we know little about the topic we are researching), our ideas emerge gradually from the observations we make during the course of the research itself. These ideas can then be used later to produce testable hypotheses of the sort favoured by positivists.

Phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel completely reject the possibility of causal explanations of human behaviour. They take a radically anti-structuralist view, arguing that society is not a real thing 'out there' determining our actions. In this view, social reality is simply the shared meanings or knowledge of its members. As such, society is not an external force – it exists only in people's consciousness.

Therefore, in this view, the subject matter of sociology can only consist of the interpretive procedures that people use to make sense of the world. Because people's actions are not governed by external causes, there is no possibility of cause-and-effect explanations of the kind sought by positivists.

Interpretivism and suicide

The interactionist Jack Douglas (1967) rejects the positivist idea of external social facts determining our behaviour. Individuals have free will and they choose how to act on the basis of meanings. To understand suicide, therefore, we must uncover its meanings for those involved, instead of imposing our own meanings onto the situation.

Douglas also rejects Durkheim's use of quantitative data from official statistics. These are not objective facts, but simply social constructions resulting from the way coroners label certain deaths as suicides. Instead, Douglas proposes we use qualitative data from case studies of suicides, to reveal the actors' meanings and give us a better idea of the real rate of suicide than the official statistics.

Like Douglas, the ethnomethodologist J. Maxwell Atkinson (1978) rejects the idea that external social facts determine behaviour, and agrees that statistics are socially constructed.

Unlike Douglas, however, Atkinson argues that we can never know the 'real rate' of suicide, even using qualitative methods, since we can never know for sure what meanings the deceased held.

For Atkinson, the only thing we can study about suicide is the way that the living make sense of deaths – the interpretive procedures coroners use to classify deaths. For ethnomethodologists, members of society have a stock of taken-for-granted assumptions with which they make sense of situations – including deaths. The sociologist's role is to uncover what this knowledge is and how coroners use it to arrive at a verdict.

Postmodernism, feminism and scientific sociology

Postmodernists also argue against the idea of a scientific sociology. This is because they regard natural science as

simply a *meta-narrative*. Despite its claim to have special access to the truth, science is just one more 'big story'; its account of the world is no more valid than any other. If this is so, there is no particular reason why we should adopt science as a model for sociology.

In fact, given the postmodernist view that there are as many different truths as there are points of view, a scientific approach is dangerous because it claims a monopoly of the truth and therefore excludes other points of view. Hence a scientific sociology not only makes false claims about having the truth; it is also a form of domination. For example, in the former Soviet Union, Marxism – a theory claiming to have discovered scientifically the truth about the ideal society – was used to justify coercion and oppression.

Poststructuralist feminists share this view of scientific sociology. They argue that the quest for a single, scientific feminist theory is a form of domination, since it covertly excludes many groups of women. Some other feminists argue that the quantitative scientific methods favoured by positivists are also oppressive and cannot capture the reality of women's experiences.

Some writers also argue that science is an undesirable model for sociology to follow because, in practice, science has not always led to the progress that positivists believed it would. For example, the emergence of 'risk society', with scientifically created dangers such as nuclear weapons and global warming, has undermined the idea that science inevitably brings benefits to humankind. If science produces such negative consequences, it is argued, it would be inappropriate for sociology to adopt it as a model.

What is science?

Although interpretivists reject the positivist view that sociology is a science, they tend to agree with the positivists' description of the natural sciences. As we have seen above, positivists see natural science as inductive reasoning or verificationism applied to the study of observable patterns.

However, not everyone accepts the positivists' portrayal of the natural sciences. A number of sociologists, philosophers and historians have put forward quite different pictures of science. We now examine three of these views, and we consider what implications each one has for whether sociology can or should be a science.

Popper notes that many systems of thought claim to have true knowledge about the world, such as religions, political ideologies, tradition, intuition and common sense, as well as

science. Given this, Popper sets out to answer two related questions about science:

- 1 What is it that distinguishes scientific knowledge from other forms of knowledge – what makes scientific knowledge unique?
- 2 Why has scientific knowledge been able to grow so spectacularly in just a few centuries?

The fallacy of induction

Popper differs from the positivists in that he rejects their view that the distinctive feature of science lies in inductive reasoning and verificationism. In Popper's view, the main reason why we should reject verificationism is what he calls 'the fallacy [error] of induction'. As we have seen, induction is the process of moving from the observation of particular instances of something to arrive at a general statement or law.

To illustrate the fallacy of induction, Popper uses the example of swans. Having observed a large number of swans, all of which were white, we might make the generalisation, 'All swans are white'. It will be relatively easy for us to make further observations that seem to verify this – there are plenty more white swans out there. But however many swans we observe, we cannot prove that all swans are white – a single observation of a black swan will destroy the theory. Thus, we can never prove a theory is true simply by producing more observations that support or 'verify' it.

Falsificationism

In Popper's view, what makes science a unique form of knowledge is the very opposite of verificationism – a principle he calls falsificationism. A scientific statement is one that in principle is capable of being falsified – proved wrong – by the evidence. That is, we must be able to say what evidence would count as falsifying the statement when we come to put it to the test. For example, a test would disprove the law of gravity if, when we let go of an object, it did not fall.

For Popper, a good theory has two features:

- It is in principle falsifiable but when tested, stands up to all attempts to disprove it.
- It is bold – that is, it claims to explain a great deal. It makes big generalisations that precisely predict a large number of cases or events, and so is at greater risk of being falsified than a more timid theory that only tries to explain a small number of events.

Analysis and Evaluation

- 1 Explain what Popper means by 'fallacy of induction'.
- 2 In Popper's view, what are the features of a good theory?

Truth

For Popper (1965), 'all knowledge is provisional, temporary, capable of refutation at any moment' – there can never be absolute proof that any knowledge is true. This is because, as the renowned physicist Stephen Hawking (1988) puts it:

'No matter how many times the results of experiments agree with some theory, you can never be sure that the next time the result will not contradict the theory.'

A good theory isn't necessarily a true theory, therefore – it is simply one that has withstood attempts to falsify it so far.

Criticism and the open society

For a theory to be falsifiable, it must be open to criticism from other scientists. In Popper's view, therefore, science is essentially a *public* activity. He sees the scientific community as a hothouse environment in which everything is open to criticism, so that the flaws in a theory can be readily exposed and better theories developed. Popper believes that this explains why scientific knowledge grows so rapidly.

Popper argues that science thrives in 'open' or liberal societies – ones that believe in free expression and the right to challenge accepted ideas. By contrast, 'closed' societies are dominated by an official belief system that claims to have the absolute truth – whether a religion, or a political ideology such as Marxism or Nazism. Such belief systems stifle the growth of science because they conflict with the provisional, falsifiable nature of scientific knowledge. For example, the 17th century astronomer Galileo was punished as a heretic by the church authorities in Rome for claiming that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa, as the church taught. We can see Rome at this time as a closed society, dominated by the church's doctrines.

Implications for sociology

Popper believes that much sociology is unscientific because it consists of theories that cannot be put to the test with the possibility that they might be falsified. For example, Marxism predicts that there will be a revolution leading to a classless society, but that it has not yet happened because of the false consciousness of the proletariat. Hence the prediction cannot be falsified. If there is a revolution, Marxism is correct – and if there isn't a revolution, Marxism is *still* correct.

However, Popper believes that sociology can be scientific, because it is capable of producing hypotheses that can in principle be falsified. For example, Julianne Ford (1969) hypothesised that comprehensive schooling would produce social mixing of pupils from different social classes. She was able to test and falsify this hypothesis through her empirical research.

Although Popper rejects Marxism as unscientific because it is untestable, he does not believe that untestable ideas are

Karl Popper: how science grows

Sir Karl Popper (1902-94) was probably the most influential philosopher of science of the 20th century. His ideas about science have important implications for sociology.

necessarily worthless. Such ideas may be of value, firstly because they may become testable at some later date, and secondly because we can still examine them for clarity and logical consistency. For example, debates between different sociological perspectives can clarify woolly thinking, question taken-for-granted assumptions and help to formulate testable hypotheses. While sociology may have a larger quantity of untestable ideas than the natural sciences,

this may simply be because it has not been in existence as long as they have.

Activity Media

Karl Popper and falsificationism

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Thomas Kuhn: scientific paradigms

Thomas S. Kuhn (1970) is a historian of science who presents a radically different view of what makes science unique. Like Popper's ideas, those of Kuhn also have important implications for sociology.

The paradigm

Kuhn's central idea is the paradigm. A paradigm is shared by members of a given scientific community (such as physicists) and defines what their science is. It provides a basic framework of assumptions, principles, methods and techniques within which members of that community work. It is a worldview that tells scientists what nature is like, which aspects of it are worth studying, what methods should be used, what kinds of questions they should ask and even the sort of answers they should expect to find.

The paradigm is thus a set of norms, or a kind of culture, because it tells scientists how they ought to think and behave. Scientists come to accept the paradigm uncritically as a result of their socialisation. For example, unlike sociology students, those in the natural sciences are not invited to consider rival perspectives. Scientists' conformity to the paradigm is rewarded with publication of their research and career success, while non-conformity may mean their work goes unpublished, or may even lead to dismissal (see Chapter 1, Topic 7 on the Velikovsky affair).

In Kuhn's view, a science cannot exist without a shared paradigm. Until there is general consensus on a single paradigm, there will only be rival schools of thought, not a science as such.

Normal science

For most of the time, the paradigm goes unquestioned and scientists do what Kuhn calls *normal science*. In normal science, scientists engage in puzzle solving. That is, the paradigm defines the questions and in broad terms, the answers. Scientists are left to fill in the detail or work out the 'neatest' solution.

This is rather like completing a jigsaw puzzle: we know from the picture on the box what the solution should be – our

job is simply to figure out how to put the pieces together to get the right result. We are not discovering or creating anything new. As Kuhn says:

'Everything but the detail is known in advance. The challenge is not to uncover the unknown, but to obtain the known.'

For Kuhn, the great advantage of the paradigm is that it allows scientists to agree on the basics of their subject and get on with productive 'puzzle-solving' work, steadily fleshing out the bare bones of the paradigm with more and more detail, thereby enlarging their picture of nature. This contrasts sharply with Popper's view of science. As John Watkins (1970) says, while Popper sees falsification as the unique feature of science, for Kuhn it is puzzle solving within a paradigm that makes science special.

Scientific revolutions

However, not all puzzle solving is successful. From time to time, scientists obtain findings contrary to those the paradigm led them to expect – pieces that don't fit the jigsaw puzzle. As these *anomalies* gradually mount up, confidence in the paradigm begins to decline, and this leads to arguments about basic assumptions and to efforts to reformulate the paradigm so as to account for the anomalies.

The science has now entered a period of *crisis*. Its previously taken-for-granted foundations are now in question; scientists become demoralised and begin to lose their sense of purpose. As Albert Einstein wrote about the crisis in physics in the early 20th century:

'It was as if the ground had been pulled out from under one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere upon which one could have built.'

Scientists begin to formulate rival paradigms and this marks the start of a *scientific revolution*. For Kuhn, rival paradigms are *incommensurable* – two competing paradigms cannot be judged or measured by the same set of standards to decide which one is 'best'.

Although they are looking at the same universe, they seem to be looking at totally different ones.

What supporters of one paradigm regard as a decisive refutation of the other, supporters of the rival paradigm will not even recognise as a valid test, because each paradigm is a totally different way of seeing the world. To move from one to the other requires a massive shift of mind-set. Many scientists find it impossible to switch from an old paradigm to a new one.

Application

- 1 What do you understand by the term 'revolution'?
- 2 What similarities can you see between a scientific revolution and a political revolution?

Eventually, one paradigm does win out and becomes accepted by the scientific community, allowing normal science to resume, but with a new set of basic assumptions, puzzles and so on. However, the process is not a rational one – in fact, Kuhn compares it with a religious conversion. Generally, the new paradigm gains support first of all from younger scientists, partly because they have less to lose than senior colleagues whose reputations have been built on the old one. In fact, as the physicist Max Planck said, the new theory triumphs 'because its opponents eventually die'.

Kuhn's view of the scientific community contrasts sharply with that of Popper. For Popper the scientific community is open, critical and rational, constantly seeking to falsify existing theories by producing evidence against them. Progress occurs by *challenging* accepted ideas.

For Kuhn, by contrast, the scientific community is not normally characterised by its openness, originality or critical spirit. For most of the time, during periods of normal science, scientists are conformists who unquestioningly

accept the key ideas of the paradigm as a basis for making progress. Only during a scientific revolution does this change. Even then, scientists have no *rational* means of choosing one paradigm rather than another.

Implications for sociology

Currently sociology is pre-paradigmatic and therefore pre-scientific, divided into competing perspectives or schools of thought. There is no shared paradigm – no agreement on the fundamentals of what to study, what method to use, what we should expect to find and so on. For example, functionalists disagree with Marxists about basic questions such as whether society is based on consensus or on conflict.

On Kuhn's definition, sociology could only become a science if such basic disagreements were resolved. Whether this is even *possible* is open to doubt. For example, so long as there are political differences between conservative and radical sociologists, rival perspectives will probably continue to exist in sociology. Even *within* perspectives, there are often disagreements about key concepts, issues and methods. It is hard to imagine such differences being overcome to create a unified paradigm.

Postmodernists might argue that a paradigm would also not be *desirable* in sociology. The paradigm sounds suspiciously like a meta-narrative – a dominant and dominating view of what reality is like. Postmodernists object to this both on the grounds that it silences minority views, and that it falsely claims to have special access to the truth.

Activity Media

The case of Dr. Velikovsky

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Realism, science and sociology

A third view of science comes from the approach known as realism. Realists such as Russell Keat and John Urry (1982) stress the similarities between sociology and certain kinds of natural science in terms of the degree of control the researcher has over the variables being researched. They distinguish between *open systems* and *closed systems*.

Closed systems are those where the researcher can control and measure all the relevant variables, and therefore can make precise predictions of the sort Popper advocates. The typical research method is the laboratory experiment, as used in sciences such as physics or chemistry.

Open systems are those where the researcher cannot control and measure all the relevant variables and so cannot make precise predictions. For example, a meteorologist cannot normally predict the weather with 100% accuracy. This is because the processes involved are too complex to measure or too large-scale to be studied in a laboratory.

Realists argue that sociologists study open systems where the processes are too complex to make exact predictions. For example, we cannot predict the crime rate precisely, because there are too many variables involved, most of which cannot be controlled, measured or identified.

Underlying structures

Realists reject the positivist view that science is only concerned with observable phenomena. Keat and Urry argue that science often assumes the existence of unobservable structures. For example, physicists cannot directly observe the interior of a black hole in space.

In the realist view, this also means that interpretivists are wrong in assuming that sociology cannot be scientific. Interpretivists believe that because actors' meanings are in their minds and not directly observable, they cannot be studied scientifically. However, if realists are correct and science can study unobservable phenomena, then this is no barrier to studying meanings scientifically.

For realists, then, both natural and social science attempt to explain the causes of events in terms of underlying structures and processes. Although these structures are often unobservable, we can work out that they exist by observing their effects. For example, we cannot directly see a thing called 'social class', but we can observe its effects on people's life chances.

In this view, much sociology is scientific. For example, unlike Popper, realists regard Marxism as scientific because it sees underlying structures such as capitalism producing effects such as poverty. Similarly, sociologists can also be scientific when they interpret behaviour in terms of actors' internal meanings – even though these are unobservable.

Unlike interpretivists, therefore, realists see little difference between natural science and sociology, except that some natural scientists are able to study closed systems under laboratory conditions.

Conclusion

Sociologists are divided as to whether sociology can be a science. While positivists favour adopting the natural sciences as a model, interpretivists reject the view that sociology can be scientific. This division derives largely from disagreement about the nature of sociology and its subject matter:

- **Positivists** see sociology as the study of causes: the social facts or structures external to individuals that cause them to behave as they do. In the positivists' view, this is the same approach as the natural sciences – to discover the cause of the patterns they observe, whether in nature or society.
- **Interpretivists** see sociology as the study of meaningful social action: the internal meanings that lead actors to

choose their course of action. Human actions are not governed by external causes, unlike events in nature, so they cannot be studied in the same way as natural phenomena.

However, while positivists and interpretivists disagree about whether sociology can be a science, they both accept the positivist model of the natural sciences as described above. Basically, the positivist view sees natural science as inductive reasoning or verificationism applied to the study of observable patterns.

Yet as we have seen, since the positivist view of science was formulated in the 19th century, quite different pictures of science have emerged, and these have very different implications for the question of whether sociology can or should be scientific. For example:

- **Popper** rejects verificationism in favour of falsificationism as the defining feature of science and argues that on this definition much sociology is unscientific, but that a scientific sociology is possible in principle.
- **Kuhn** argues that sociology can only become a science once all sociologists adopt a single shared paradigm.
- **Realists** argue that science does not just study observable phenomena, as positivists argue, but underlying unobservable structures. On this basis, both Marxism and interpretivism may be seen as scientific.

Topic summary

Positivists argue that sociology can be a science by modelling itself on the natural sciences, using quantitative methods and induction or **verificationism** to establish observable patterns in behaviour and develop **causal laws**. **Interpretivists** argue that sociology cannot be scientific, because human conduct is not governed by external causes but by **internal meanings**. The task of sociology is to use qualitative methods to uncover these meanings through **verstehen**.

Others argue that natural science differs from what positivists and interpretivists imagine it to be. **Popper** argues that science is based on **falsificationism**, not verificationism. **Kuhn** argues that a shared **paradigm** is the hallmark of a science, while **realists** argue that science studies **unobservable structures** as well as observable facts. Each of these views has implications for whether or not we regard sociology as a science.

EXAMINING SOCIOLOGY AND SCIENCE

QuickCheck Questions

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net

- 1 What does Durkheim mean by 'social facts'?
- 2 Why do positivists favour 'macro' or structural explanations of behaviour?
- 3 According to interpretivists, what is the subject matter of sociology?
- 4 What is meant by *verstehen* and why do interpretivists favour its use?
- 5 Explain the difference between verificationism and falsificationism.
- 6 What does Kuhn mean by a 'paradigm'?
- 7 Explain what Kuhn means when he says that in normal science, scientists engage in puzzle solving.
- 8 According to realists, what is the difference between open and closed systems?

Questions to try

Item A

Positivists believe that sociology can be a science by following the logic and methods of the natural sciences. In the view of positivists, this involves gathering objective quantitative data to 'verify' or prove hypotheses and discover causal laws. While accepting the positivists' view of science, interpretivists reject the claim that we can study human beings in this way. However, positivism is just one view of what constitutes science. For example, Popper argues that science involves seeking to falsify hypotheses, while Kuhn argues that a scientific subject is one that has a unified paradigm.

- 1 Outline and explain **two** reasons why some people argue that sociology cannot be a science. (10 marks)
- 2 Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the claim that whether sociology can be a science depends on what we mean by science in the first place. (20 marks)

The Examiner's Advice

Q1 Spend about 15 minutes on this question. Divide your time fairly equally between the two reasons. You don't need a separate introduction; just start on your first reason. Possible reasons include lack of falsifiability; lack of a unified paradigm; free will; empathetic methods; the study of subjective meanings; the problems of using experimental methods.

Choose two reasons and describe each one in some detail, explaining how it concludes that sociology cannot be a science. Do this by creating a chain of reasoning (see **Box 4.1** in chapter 4). For example, Kuhn argues that to be a science, a subject must have a unified paradigm. Sociology, with its rival theoretical and methodological perspectives, lacks a shared paradigm.

Apply your knowledge of one or two debates between perspectives, methods or theories to illustrate this. For example, positivists favour quantitative methods while interpretivists reject them, reflecting different views of sociology's subject matter. Use concepts and issues such as normal science, puzzle solving, free will, determinism, social constructs, social facts, testability, control of variables, *verstehen*/empathy, detachment, ethical problems of experiments.

Q2 Spend about 30 minutes on this question. It suggests that there are different views of science and that each has different implications for whether sociology is a science. Use the Item to start with the positivist view of science and the debate with interpretivism about whether on this view sociology is a science.

Then explain other views of science, applying each view in turn to sociology. Create a chain of reasoning to do this. For example, according to Popper, for a subject to be scientific, its theories must be open to falsification when tested. This means that many sociological theories (e.g. Marxism) cannot be considered a science. Use material from the Item, linking this to your own knowledge.

Use concepts and issues such as inductive reasoning, verificationism, *verstehen*, postmodernism, feminism, falsificationism (Popper), paradigms (Kuhn), normal science, scientific revolution, open and closed systems (realism), and underlying structures. Evaluate as you go along by drawing conclusions about whether, on each definition of science in turn, sociology can be seen as scientific. You can also offer a final evaluative overview at the end of your answer.

OBJECTIVITY AND VALUES IN SOCIOLOGY

As we saw in Topic 3, one view of science is that it produces true knowledge. According to this view, scientists take a detached and objective approach to their research. They don't allow their own subjective values to get in the way of discovering the facts.

Everyone has values – beliefs, opinions and prejudices. Our values are influenced by many factors, including our class, gender, ethnicity, upbringing and experiences.

Given that sociologists are also members of society, can they study it objectively and without bias, unaffected by their own personal values? Can sociologists' research be 'value free' – free from contamination or distortion by their values?

- Some argue that it is both *possible and desirable* to keep subjective values out of research to produce true, scientific knowledge about society.
- Others argue that, because sociologists are humans (with values) studying other humans (with values), it is *impossible* to keep personal values out of one's research.
- Some go further, arguing that it is actually *desirable* for sociologists to use their values to improve society through their work. This is called 'committed sociology'.

In this Topic, we explore the answers different sociologists have given to the question of whether sociology can or should be objective and value-free.

The classical sociologists and values

The classical thinkers who shaped sociology in its early years, such as Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber, all had views on the question of objectivity and value freedom.

The early positivists

For the early positivists Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the creation of a better society was not a matter of subjective values or personal opinions about what was 'best'. They shared the Enlightenment or modernist view of the role of sociology. As the science of society, sociology's job was to discover the truth about how society works, uncovering the laws that govern its proper functioning. Equipped with this knowledge, social problems could be solved and human life improved.

In their view, scientific sociology would reveal the one correct society. This gave sociologists a crucial role. By discovering the truth about how society worked, sociologists would be able to say objectively and with scientific certainty what was really best for society – they would be able to prescribe how things ought to be. In fact, Comte regarded sociology as the 'queen of the sciences' and saw sociologists as latter-day priests of a new scientific religion of truth.

Karl Marx

There is debate about whether or not Karl Marx (1818-83) was a positivist. However, it is certainly true that he saw himself as a scientist and that he believed his method of historical analysis, historical materialism, could reveal the line of development of human society. This development involved an evolution through a series of different types of class-based society, leading ultimately to a future classless communist society, in which exploitation, alienation and poverty would be ended, and each individual would be free to achieve their true potential.

The role of Marx's sociology, therefore, was to reveal the truth of this development, especially to the proletariat, since they would be the class to overthrow capitalism and herald the birth of communist society. Marx thus takes for granted the value of the ideal communist society and argues that his scientific approach will show us how to reach it. In this he is similar to Comte and Durkheim, in that he sees science as helping to 'deliver' the good society.

Max Weber

Marx, Durkheim and Comte made no distinction between the facts as revealed by science and the values that we should hold – since they believed that science could tell us what these values should be. By contrast, Max Weber (1864-1920) makes a sharp distinction between value judgments and facts and he argues that we cannot derive the one from the other.

For example, research might show that divorcees are more likely to commit suicide. However, this fact does not demonstrate the truth of the value judgment that we should make divorce harder to obtain. There is nothing about the fact that logically compels us to accept the value. For example, we might argue that we should instead make it harder to get married (another value), or that people have every right to commit suicide if they wish (a third value). None of these value judgments are 'proven' by the established fact. Indeed, in Weber's view, a value can be neither proved nor disproved by the facts: they belong to different realms.

However, despite making a sharp distinction between facts and values, Weber still saw an essential role for values in sociological research. We can divide his views into four stages of the research process.

1 Values as a guide to research

Weber took the idea from phenomenology that social reality is made up of a 'meaningless infinity' of facts that make it impossible to study it in its totality. Therefore the best the researcher can do is to select certain facts and study these.

But how do we choose which facts to study? In Weber's view, we can only select them in terms of what we regard as important based on our own values – in other words, their *value relevance* to us.

Values are thus essential in enabling us to select which aspects of reality to study and in developing concepts with which to understand these aspects. For example, feminists value gender equality and this leads them to study women's oppression and to develop concepts such as patriarchy with which to understand it.

2 Data collection and hypothesis testing

While values are essential in selecting what to study, in Weber's view we must be as objective and unbiased as possible when we are actually collecting the facts, keeping our values and prejudices out of the process.

For example, we should not ask leading questions designed to give the answers that we *want* to hear: our questions should aim to get respondents to give us their view, not our own.

Once we have gathered the facts, we can use them to test a hypothesis. Again, we must keep our values out of the process – the hypothesis must stand or fall solely on whether or not it fits the observed facts.

3 Values in the interpretation of data

Values become important again when we come to interpret the data we have collected. The facts need to be set in a theoretical framework so that we can understand their significance and draw conclusions from them. In Weber's view, our choice of theoretical framework or perspective is influenced by our values. Therefore, we must be explicit about them, spelling out our values so that others can see if unconscious bias is present in our interpretation of our data.

4 Values and the sociologist as a citizen

Research findings often have very real effects on people's lives, but sociologists and scientists sometimes choose to ignore the uses to which their work is put. They argue that their job is merely to conduct objective research and discover the facts; it is for the politicians or public to decide what use to make of their findings.

Weber rejects this view. He argues that scientists and sociologists are also human beings and citizens and they must not dodge the moral and political issues their work raises by hiding behind words such as 'objectivity' or 'value freedom'. They must take moral responsibility for the harm their research may do. For example, Einstein's theories helped make the atomic bomb possible; yet subsequently he spoke out against nuclear weapons.

To summarise, Weber sees values as relevant to the sociologist in choosing what to research, in interpreting the data collected and in deciding the use to which the findings should be put. By contrast, the sociologist's values must be kept out of the actual process of fact gathering.

Value freedom and commitment

The issue of commitment that Weber raised has remained at the centre of debates about the place of the sociologist's values in research. For example, some modern positivists have shied away from any value commitments.

By contrast, Marxists, interactionists and feminists have argued for a 'committed sociology' in which the sociologist spells out the importance of their values to their research.

Modern positivists

Unlike Durkheim and Comte, who were openly committed to re-shaping society in certain ways, by the mid 20th century positivists tended to argue that their own values were irrelevant to their research. There were two reasons for this:

1 The desire to appear scientific

Science is concerned with matters of fact, not value – with 'is' questions, not 'ought' questions. Therefore, sociologists should remain morally neutral – their job is simply to establish the truth about people's behaviour, not to judge it.

Critics argue that this reflected a desire to make sociology respectable. Science has high prestige in modern society, so mimicking its ways would raise the subject's status and earn it respectability. This was particularly important in the early 20th century, when sociology was just becoming established as an academic discipline.

2 The social position of sociology

Alvin Gouldner (1975) argues that by the 1950s, American sociologists in particular had become mere 'spiritless technicians'. Earlier in the century, sociology had been a

critical discipline, often challenging accepted authority. However, by the 1950s, sociologists were no longer 'problem makers' who defined their own research problems. Instead they had become 'problem takers' who hired themselves out to organisations such as business and the military, to take on and solve *their* problems for them.

Gouldner argues that, by leaving their own values behind them, sociologists were making a 'gentleman's promise' that they would not rock the boat by criticising their paymasters. Because they were simply hired hands, they saw their own values as irrelevant. This is exactly the attitude that Weber was criticising when he said that sociologists must take moral responsibility for the effects of their work.

Activity Media

Social scientists and the military

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Committed sociology

By contrast with the positivists, some sociologists argue for a committed sociology. For example, Gunnar Myrdal (1969) argues that sociologists should not only spell out their values – as Weber recommends – they should also openly 'take sides' by espousing the values and interests of particular individuals or groups.

Committed sociologists who advocate this approach, such as Myrdal and Gouldner, argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to keep values out of research. In Gouldner's view, value-free sociology is:

- **impossible**, because either the sociologist's own values, or those of their paymasters, are bound to be reflected in their work.
- **undesirable**, since without values to guide research, sociologists are merely selling their services to the highest bidder. For example, Gouldner argues that:

'From such a standpoint, there is no reason why one cannot sell his knowledge to spread a disease just as freely as he can to fight it. Indeed, some sociologists have had no hesitation about doing market research designed to sell more cigarettes, although well aware of the implications of recent cancer research.'

Whose side are we on?

If all sociology is influenced by values, this means the sociologist must inevitably take sides. By not choosing a side, the sociologist is in fact taking the side of the more powerful against the less powerful.

The interactionist Howard Becker (1970) asks, 'Whose side are we on?' He argues that values are always

present in sociology. Traditionally, however, positivists and functionalists have tended to take the viewpoint of powerful groups – police, psychiatrists and so on.

Becker argues that instead of seeing things from the perspective of these 'overdogs', sociologists should adopt a compassionate stance and take the side of the underdogs – the criminals, mental patients and other powerless groups. This is partly because less is known about these groups and their story needs to be told in order to redress the balance. By identifying with the underdog and giving them a voice, we can **reveal** a previously hidden side of social reality.

For example, by empathising with the mental patient, we can show the hidden rationality of behaviour that the psychiatrist thinks of as irrational. In fact, as the interactionist Erving Goffman (1968) argues, to describe the situation of the mental patient faithfully, we have to take their side. We have to be biased in favour of the patient and against the psychiatrist.

This emphasis on identifying and empathising with the powerless has clear links to the kinds of research methods favoured by interactionists. They have a strong preference for qualitative methods such as participant observation, which they see as revealing the meanings of these 'outsiders'.

However, Gouldner criticises Becker for taking a romantic and sentimental approach to disadvantaged groups. He accuses Becker of being concerned only with those who are 'on their backs' – the misunderstood, negatively labelled, exotic specimens of deviant behaviour.

Instead, Gouldner adopts a Marxist perspective. He argues that sociologists should take the side of those who are 'fighting back' – the political radicals struggling to change society. Sociology should not confine itself to describing the viewpoint of the underdog. It should be committed to ending their oppression by unmasking the ways in which the powerful maintain their position.

Funding and careers

Most sociological research is funded by someone other than sociologists themselves. Funding sources include government departments, businesses and voluntary organisations. Often, the body that pays for the research controls the direction it takes and the kinds of questions it asks – and fails to ask. Thus the sociologist's work is likely to embody the values and interests of their paymasters. Sometimes, funding bodies may block publication of the research if its findings prove unacceptable.

Sociologists may also wish to further their careers and reputations, and this may influence their choice of topic (for example, choosing something that is in fashion), their research questions and how they interpret their findings. Some may censor themselves for fear that being too outspoken will harm their career prospects or even cost

CHAPTER 3

them their job. Sociologists in university departments are also likely to be under pressure to publish research, perhaps regardless of its quality or usefulness.

For Gouldner, all research is inevitably influenced by values – whether it is the values of the sociologist, or those of the funding body that pays for the research.

Perspectives and methods

Different sociological perspectives can be seen as embodying different assumptions and values about how society is or should be. For example:

- **Feminism** sees society as based on gender inequality and promotes the rights of women.
- **Functionalism** sees society as harmonious and espouses conservative values that favour the status quo.
- **Marxism** sees society as conflict-ridden and strives for a classless society.

These assumptions and values influence the topics that sociologists of different perspectives choose to research, the concepts they develop and the conclusions they reach. For example, functionalists have concluded that inequality is beneficial for society, whereas Marxists conclude that it produces exploitation of the poor by the rich.

Similarly, there is a link between sociologists' methods and their value-stance. For example, interactionists' preference for qualitative methods fits with their desire to empathise with the underdog, since such methods give them access to the actor's meanings. Likewise, the functionalist and positivist tendency to take the side of the 'establishment' and the viewpoint of those in authority fits with their uncritical acceptance of official statistics produced by government. Thus both interactionists and functionalists can be accused of selecting methods that produce facts that reflect their values and outlook.

Objectivity and relativism

If all perspectives involve values, are their findings just a reflection of their values, rather than a true picture of society? If so, there would be no way of deciding which of these different versions of reality – if any – was true.

One version of this idea is known as relativism. Relativism argues that:

- Different groups, cultures and individuals – including sociologists – have different views as to what is true. Each sees the world in their own way, through their own perspectives, concepts, values and interests.
- There is no independent way of judging whether any view is truer than any other.

All sociologists would agree with the first statement. For example, as we saw in Chapter 1, different cultures hold

often widely different religious beliefs that affect what they believe to be true.

However, relativism goes much further. It argues that there is no absolute or objective truth – just truths plural. What you believe is true, *is* true – for you. What I believe is true, *is* true – but only for me. So if you believe the earth is round, while I think it is flat, there is no way of saying who is right.

Relativism and postmodernism

In sociology, postmodernists take a relativist view of knowledge. They reject the idea that any one account of the social world is superior to any other – there are no 'privileged accounts' that have special access to the truth. Any perspective that claims to have the truth, such as Marxism, is just a meta-narrative or 'big story'. All knowledge, from whatever perspective, is based on values and assumptions and thus no perspective has any special claim to be true.

Of course, if this is correct, then it must apply to postmodernism too – which leads to the paradoxical conclusion that we shouldn't believe what postmodernism says either! In other words, relativism is self-defeating, since it claims to be telling us something true, while simultaneously telling us that no one can tell us what is true.

In practice, sociologists rarely go this far. After all, there is a real factual world 'out there', in which women generally do more housework than men, in which ethnic background may affect a person's life chances and so on. Regardless of our values, we can observe and record these facts. And once we have established the existence of such facts, they can be used to judge the worth of competing theories. In the end, it matters less whether a theory contains certain values, than whether it can explain the world we observe.

Topic summary

The early positivists and Marx believed we could discover objective scientific knowledge and use it to improve society. Weber argued that values are essential in deciding what to research, in interpreting findings and in determining how they should be used, but must be kept out of the data-collection process. However, 20th century positivists claimed to be 'value-free', leading Gouldner to accuse them of being subservient to their paymasters. Becker argues that sociologists should take the side of the underdog. The values of those funding the research play a part in determining what gets researched. Sociologists' own values influence the kinds of research questions they ask, their methods and findings.