**THEORIES OF SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE**

**THINK SOCIOLOGY CAN BE A SCIENCE?**

**1) Positivist sociology**

**Comte** argued that sociology should be based upon the same methods as natural science. He said that if we can find “facts” about society we could then identify a cause and effect relationships and laws in society.

**Durkheim** said that social facts, institutions, beliefs and values of society, should be treated the same way as the objects and processes of the scientific world. He said these social facts can be objectively measured, quantified and statistically analysed, and from these methods correlational and causational relationships can be draw, leading to scientific theories and explanations of society. So Durkheim said society can be measured in the same way as the natural world.

Durkheim based his beliefs upon his research in suicide. He found that suicide rates differ hugely in different cultures; therefore something in society must be causing this, not just psychological differences. He also found a link between suicide and other social facts such as religion and location. To find these links between various social facts and suicide he used a scientific method and eventually created a “real law” about society, Durkheim said that this shows that using scientific methods in sociology is appropriate.

**Popper** said we need to take the approach of falsifying our findings in sociology. This means trying to disprove our theory with data rather than looking for evidence to prove a theory. Popper’s theory of falsification supports a deductive approach, whereby you look for data and then create a theory.

Popper’s work actually suggests sociology isn’t a science as, unlike in closed systems such as laboratory experiments, it is very difficult to falsify in society due to the number of variables that can’t be controlled.

**Kuhn** said science is based in paradigms, set ideas and values that scientific research is based within. For example the view that the world was flat was a paradigm. Kuhn says that science only moves forward in ‘scientific revolutions’, where one paradigm is replaced with another. So discovering the world wasn’t flat was a paradigm shift.

Kuhn says that sociology can’t be a science because there are a range of different sociological perspectives, or different paradigms. There is little evidence that these different paradigms will join as one and therefor sociology cannot be called a science, after all Kuhn says science has one paradigm that shifts.

**2) Realist Sociology**

Realists say that there are differences between the social and natural worlds, however this doesn’t mean social science is impossible. This is because both the natural and social worlds are produced by structures and mechanisms, and it is the job of sociology as a science to uncover these structures and mechanisms.

**Andrew Sayer** said that there are two different types of “systems” within science. Closed system such as laboratory experiments and open systems where there are many variables which are difficult to control. Sciences such as physics and chemistry are able to create closed systems fairly easily, making scientific research much simpler. However there are also open systems, such as meteorology, which are considered a science.

Society is an example of an open system, there are many, many variables that make scientific study difficult, however there are still underlying structures and mechanisms in society and this means sociology can be considered a science.

**3) Interpretivist Sociology**

**Max Weber** said that sociology is ‘a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation’. Weber said we need to understand why people do things if we are to truly understand their actions.

Weber developed the theory of *verstehen* whereby researchers put themselves in the position of those in a society in order to try and understand why they act in certain ways.

**Herbert Blumer** said that instead of looking at society as a whole we need to look at the meanings of small-scale interactions. He said researchers should not only see the world through the eyes of the social actors, they should immerse themselves in this world so they can really fully understand the meaning behind actions. So in the case of suicide we should look at each case individually rather than saying it was caused by the same thing for all of one society.

**Phenomenology** takes this interpretivist perspective to the extreme. It says that our reality consists  just of meanings, therefore the job of the sociologist is to discover the meanings of actions and behaviour and nothing else.

<https://revisesociology.wordpress.com/2012/05/13/2-realist-sociology/>