

## 2.6 The nature of sociology and the relationship between sociology and social policy

This section explores the extent to which sociology is a science, as well as exploring views which challenge the idea that sociology should even try to be a science. The second part of this section explores the relationship between sociology and **social policy**. To what extent does sociology shape social policy, or does social policy in fact shape sociology?

**Social policy** is a set of plans or laws which are created by the government to tackle social problems or to achieve changes which benefit society.

### The nature of science and the extent to which sociology can be regarded as scientific

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There are several key questions and arguments posed by this debate:

- What is scientific thought and what methodology does it involve?
- The argument that it is possible and desirable for sociology to be a science.
- The argument that it is not possible for sociology to be a science.
- Questions over the extent to which science itself is actually scientific in practice.
- Changing views on scientific thought and research today.

#### Exam tip

Wherever possible when writing essays, draw on contemporary examples. Remember to apply them to the question.

### What is scientific thought and what methodology does it involve?

The idealised view of science claims that science has the following characteristics, which mirror those of the natural sciences:

- It seeks to establish social facts.
- It tries to discover cause-and-effect relationships.
- It aims to be objective.
- It claims to be able to verify or check results.
- In order to establish social facts, it stresses the importance of observable evidence or **empirical evidence**.

**Empirical evidence** refers to any findings which are directly observable.

### The argument that it is possible and desirable for sociology to be a science

- This is known as the positivist view which sees sociology as the study of social facts.
- It is associated with Durkheim, who argued, through his comparative study of suicide, that it is both possible and desirable for sociology to be a science.
- It argues that objectivity is possible if carefully planned research takes place.
- Positivists assume that people's behaviour is shaped by social forces and is therefore observable and measurable.
- It argues that sociology should use quantitative methods and data, which rely on observable (empirical) evidence, with an emphasis on reliable data.
- Cause-and-effect relationships should be established, making it possible to establish correlations between variables.

### The argument that it is not possible for sociology to be a science

- This is known as the interpretivist view.
- This takes the view that humans are not passive and have free will, therefore cannot be studied in the same way that objects can be; they are autonomous.



- According to interpretivists, people make decisions based on the way they interpret the world around them and the meanings that they attach to things – sociologists should aim to uncover these meanings.
- Weber explores this approach in his classic study on Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism.
- The focus of this view is on using qualitative research methods and data, ensuring that the data provides an honest reflection known as validity, as well as *verstehen*, seeing the world through the eyes of those being researched.

## Questions over the extent to which science itself is actually scientific in practice

There have been criticisms about how scientific science actually is, and the extent to which scientists themselves are able to be objective. For example:

- Scientists may make assumptions or allow themselves to be influenced by external factors such as commercial companies employing them to prove that their product is effective.
- Scientists may also want to further their own careers and this may involve pursuing or consciously avoiding particular areas.

### Case study

The Thalidomide drug scandal of the 1960s represents a failing of science. Claims were made that the drug Thalidomide had been tested for safety and could be used to prevent sickness in

pregnancy. However, some women taking the drug ended up having babies that were deformed, despite claims about the drug's safety and scientific rules having been followed.

#### Key thinker: Popper

Popper argues that it is possible for sociology to be a science, provided that the deductive method is used. This means that once a scientist tests a hypothesis, it should continue to be tested and re-tested. If the results are clear and confirmed, then a new law or social fact can be created. Popper claimed that rather than try to prove a social fact, research should attempt to **falsify** a fact to ensure its reliability. Popper also pointed out that laws or facts may not remain so over time.

**To falsify** means to attempt to prove an idea or hypothesis wrong.

A **paradigm** is a framework of concepts and theories within a particular subject, a world view which shapes the way that scientists do their research.

#### Key thinker: Kuhn

Kuhn argued that normal science (that is, the real science that actually occurs, not the idealised form) exists within a particular framework or view of the world which is known as a **paradigm**. The paradigm that a scientist works within will shape the way they approach their research, the questions they might ask, as well as informing assumptions about the world around them. However, over time, challenging evidence builds and then there is a scientific revolution, which results in a change in paradigm. Because of these ideas, Kuhn argues that sociology is 'pre-paradigmatic' as there are simply too many competing ideas.

### Case study

When Newton discovered gravity and Einstein made his general theory of relativity, these major

discoveries changed the way all scientists thought and worked – in other words, there was a paradigm shift.



These examples all reveal the fact that science operates within a set of value-laden ideas.

## Changing views on science

- Realist views of science have emerged, which acknowledge that although natural sciences are useful and their principles important, social sciences are also possible and desirable.
- Bhaskar argues that science uncovers underlying structures and mechanisms which are the same for society. For example, functionalists argue that there are underlying structural forces that shape people's behaviour.
- Sayer argues that in science there are 'open' and 'closed' systems. Open systems are where not all variables can be controlled, and predictions cannot be made, whereas closed systems refer to settings such as laboratories where variables are controllable. Realists believe that it is possible to use open systems to explain underlying social causes of human behaviour.

Therefore is it possible using these definitions to say that sociology can be a science?

- Feminists such as Oakley are critical of the way that science operates, arguing that it has a tendency to be malestream, in other words, that it was created by men, for men. They favour the development and use of a 'feminist methodology' in which women researchers seek to empower women and do not attempt to remain objective, for example.
- Postmodernists are critical of science, claiming that large, overarching sets of answers are no longer appropriate or desirable within contemporary society. They claim rather that there are competing sets of truths rather than one. Beck also argues that science has not always managed to resolve **social problems** and points to the risks that have actually been introduced through scientific advances, for example, global warming.

**A social problem** is an issue in society which is seen as problematic and needs improvement. This issue may cause problems, not only for those it directly relates to, but also may affect others directly or indirectly.

## Now test yourself

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37 Complete the following sentences summarising different views on sociology as a science. Use the words listed below.

- |                   |                   |               |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| ● passive         | ● free will       | ● Popper      |
| ● social facts    | ● social sciences | ● Kuhn        |
| ● reliability     | ● functionalists  | ● realists    |
| ● society         | ● objective       | ● positivists |
| ● interpretivists | ● meanings        | ● empirical   |

- Science is based on the idea that directly observable or \_\_\_\_\_ data should be used to support claims and create \_\_\_\_\_.
- Science makes the assumption that individuals are \_\_\_\_\_ and shaped by \_\_\_\_\_. Sociologists known as \_\_\_\_\_ think the same.
- \_\_\_\_\_ argue that sociology can and should be a science, claiming that it is possible for people to remain \_\_\_\_\_. They favour \_\_\_\_\_ and want to establish cause-and-effect relationships.
- \_\_\_\_\_ argue that sociology cannot be a science as individuals have \_\_\_\_\_. They argue that instead sociology should focus on uncovering \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ argue that in different ways, science is not as objective as it claims to be.
- \_\_\_\_\_ argue that people cannot be studied scientifically but that \_\_\_\_\_ are possible.

## Answers on p. 226



## Debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom

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There is a strong debate in sociology about the extent to which sociology can be value free. This means the extent to which sociologists can be objective in their research, excluding their own feelings and views. This section explores the key views in the debate.

### Sociology can be and should be value free

- Sociology can and should uncover social facts. That is the purpose of the discipline and this research then helps underpin social policy and change society.
- The founding fathers of sociology, such as Durkheim, wanted sociology to be value free.
- Objectivity is both desirable and possible.
- By using rigorous scientific methods, bias can be minimised even if it cannot be eradicated.
- Value freedom means that the conclusions of research are separated from any variables such as class, age or gender or subjective desires or elements which may make them more useful to sociologists.
- Appropriate research methods can be used to stop the personal views of the researcher influencing the research, and these methods can be opened up to wider criticisms from other sociologists. This allows the impact of values to be minimalised.

### Sociology cannot be value free

- Sociologists are like anyone else and have feelings and values which shape the way they act and think. These need to be acknowledged and we need to understand our own biases.
- Gouldner argues that all sociologists are influenced by 'domain assumptions', which are basic assumptions about what society is and what social life consists of, which result in very different research questions being asked. For example, Marxists and functionalists have very different domain assumptions.
- Humans are social actors and are undoubtedly influenced by others around them; however, research is still important and valuable and interesting interpretations of this research can be important.
- Positivists impose their bias through the kinds of questions that they ask and don't ask. This means their research is likely to be more problematic than interpretivist research, which acknowledges the views that researchers have.
- It is not just the researcher who has values and beliefs. Those being researched may also be influenced through the research process, known as the Hawthorne effect.

### Sociology should assume its role is to reveal inequalities in society and address these through research

- Sociology is a discipline which should concern itself with creating a fairer society, therefore it should not focus on trying to be value free.
- Marxists argue that the role of sociology should be to uncover the values of the capitalist system to the people who are being exploited so that they are able to challenge the system.



- Labelling theorists such as Becker argue that sociologists are often in a position of power to understand the way that dominant groups apply labels and should challenge these existing patterns.
- Feminist theorists argue that science is traditionally malestream and therefore represents male concerns, issues and approaches. Therefore, sociology has not been value free and research should instead focus on making society more fair and equal, and not be concerned with objectivity. Feminists go further and argue that within research, the exploited should be helped to understand their own exploitation and encouraged to change their positions and challenge underlying patriarchal ideology.

### Now test yourself

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- 38 Which of the following statements are true and which are false?
- Positivists believe in *verstehen*.
  - Interpretivists argue that values should be taken into account in research.
  - Kuhn believes that scientists operate within paradigms.
  - Marxists argue that research ought to reflect scientific objectivity.
  - Gouldner argues that sociologists operate within domain assumptions which shape their views and research questions.

Answers on p. 226

## The relationship between sociology and social policy

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This section explores the extent to which sociology shapes social policy and the extent to which policy shapes sociology. Sociology has always played a role in various social movements. From feminism to Marxism, it has sought to go beyond theory to seek to change society.

### Theoretical views on social policies

- **Functionalists** are positive about the role of social policy in improving society. They argue that policies therefore reflect the collective values of society and that every institution is becoming increasingly specialised and improving. Therefore, the role of the state is more effective over time. Functionalists claim that policies adapt to changes in society.
- **New Right** thinkers such as Murray (1984) argue that the state should play a limited role in people's lives and that social policy should place responsibility on the individual.
- **Marxists** argue that social policies are produced by the ruling class who use these to assert their hegemonic ideology, maintaining ruling class control and capitalist based class inequalities. Policies are used to draw attention to the working class, while ignoring the problems with the ruling class and to maintain the idea that society is fair. Some Marxists argue that policies form part of the working-class 'false class consciousness', giving the illusion that help is at hand but really maintaining societal structural inequalities.
- **Feminists** take different views on social policy, but they agree that many policies benefit men and are written by men from a male