

'Evaluate the view that sociology is a science' [20]

Some sociologists argue that sociology can be scientific, and that scientific methods can be applied to studies and experiments to ensure <sup>that</sup> they are objective and 'value free'. Durkheim is a classical positivist and he argues that sociology can be a science, and that human behaviour is a response to external forces in much the same way as the natural world. Other sociologists however, such as modern positivists, argue that sociology should try to be scientific, but can't be. Popper would argue that we live in an open system with too many variables, and therefore it's hard to establish a 'cause and effect' relationship. Interpretivists go a step further by saying that sociology cannot and should not be a science. Weber would argue that to explain and interpret human society, meanings must be uncovered, through a process of understanding. \* this cannot be achieved through quantitative, scientific data, as sociology is too complex and everyone has such different experiences which must be explained. *Good*

\* Interpretivists argue

Comte, a positivist sociologist, argued that the application of natural science methodology to the study of society based on empirical evidence and objectivity would produce a 'positive science of sociology' - showing that behaviour in the social world is governed by laws of cause and effect in the same way as the behaviour of objects in the natural world. Positivists would argue that sociology can be scientific and value free, as appropriate research methods can be used to stop the personal views of the researcher influencing the result. These methods can then be opened up to wider criticisms from other sociologists. However, it could be argued that objectivity in methodological research is simply not possible. Some sociologists argue that value freedom is a myth. Sociologists are like anyone else, and have feelings and values which shape the way they act and think. Giddens argues that all sociologists are influenced by 'domain assumptions', which result in very different research questions

being asked. For example, Marxists and Functionalists have very different domain assumptions. Furthermore, it's not just the researcher who has values and beliefs. Those being researched may also be influenced by the research process, known as the Hawthorne effect. This could suggest that sociology cannot be a science, as the research process simply can't be objective and value free, which is essential within a science.

Similarly, Weber argues that sociology can't but also shouldn't be a science. He argues that in order to understand and explain human society, it's necessary to discover and interpret the meanings people give to situations. This is achieved through a 'process of understanding' which he termed 'verstehen'. This methodological approach is not scientific, as the researchers have to try and put themselves in the position of people whose actions they are trying to understand. This is a subjective approach, which positivists would argue is wrong and undesirable - as evidence and social facts cannot be achieved. Interpretivists however would argue that gaining qualitative data in this way ensures greater validity and helps us to understand more about society.

Some sociologists argue that sociology could be scientific, but this is undesirable and not possible at the moment. Kuhn argues that normal science 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. Kuhn argues that sociology is 'pre-paradigmatic', as there are simply too many competing ideas, therefore it would be too difficult for sociology to be scientific.



It could be argued that some parts of sociology can be scientific, for instance, some methods could uncover quantitative data, which would be favoured by positivists. This data could then be analysed and correlations could be discovered which help to shape social facts. For instance, if household incomes were correlated against the average grades which children from the different households achieve in school. This could create a social fact which states: 'the lower the household income, the lower a child's grades', or 'family income has an impact on educational achievement.' This type of method would be scientific, as it would involve numbers and quantitative forms of data - however this fails to uncover meanings and reasons to explain 'why'. Interpretivists would argue that qualitative data is more useful as it can uncover meanings and reasons which are different for each individual. For instance, it may be true that children from lower income families do worse in school, but is this the correct cause and effect? The actual cause could be due to cultural deprivation, lack of a male role model or the restricted code used in the home. As argued by Popper, there are too many variables to establish an accurate cause and effect relationship.

In conclusion, although some aspects of sociology can be carried out and analysed scientifically, most of it cannot be and arguably shouldn't be. Society is too complex and people's experiences so diverse, that it would be impossible to control the variables.

Postmodernists argue that contemporary society is too diverse to establish social facts which apply to all. They claim that there are competing sets of truths rather than one. Furthermore, if studied scientifically, sociology would be very limited to facts and numbers, and would fail to uncover meanings and reasons which can be extremely important.

20/20 - (A)

