

## Debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom

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

TESTED 

- 18 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

REVISED 

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

# ■ Objectivity and values in sociology

- **Classical positivists** such as **Durkheim** argued that sociology could be value free. Sociologists should discover laws about human behaviour in order to understand how society works and to improve it through social policies. Positivists believe it is the job of the sociologist to establish the 'truth' in a neutral, detached way. Value freedom is possible as the researcher's own beliefs should not influence how they conduct their research or interpret their results.
- **Interpretivists** and social action theorists reject the claim that sociology can be an objective science. They argue that the purpose of sociological inquiry is to uncover meanings and gain *verstehen* through qualitative methods and not to establish cause and effect. They would argue that sociologists, rather than being value free and objective, need to be subjective and will inevitably be influenced by their values.
- **Weber** argues that sociologists cannot be value free when choosing a research topic and interpreting and applying findings. However, he feels that researchers should be objective and unbiased when carrying out their research.
- Modern positivists argue that sociologists can be value free as they can and should remain morally neutral when conducting research. Many sociologists such as Weber and **Gouldner** reject this view and argue that sociologists have a '**moral responsibility**' when conducting research. They argue that as citizens, researchers cannot divorce themselves from the potential harm that could result from the findings of their research.

Be prepared to apply issues from the sociology as a science debate to whether sociology can be value free. For example, realists argue that sociology can attempt to be scientific in studying open systems in a neutral way but they argue that sociologists cannot be completely value free.

## Exam tip

An exam question may ask you to evaluate the claim that sociology can and/or should be value free. Make sure that arguments and evaluation points are clearly applied to these different claims.

Crime and deviance (with theory and methods) 45

## Theory and methods

- Gouldner also argued that sociologists should be 'committed' rather than 'morally neutral' and pretending to be value free. Sociologists such as **Marxists** and **feminists** argue that value freedom is undesirable and that sociologists should be **value laden** — they should make value judgements and should aim to improve society through sociological research.
- **Labelling theorist Becker** argues that sociologists should take the side of the 'underdog', such as working-class students and criminals labelled by powerful groups in society. Becker felt that interpretivist methods should be used to gain *verstehen* on the view of the 'outsiders'. Gouldner was critical of this as not going far enough. As a Marxist he argued that sociologists should be on the side of the people fighting back against capitalist society.
- For **postmodernists** all knowledge is relative; no one theory holds the absolute objective truth. All modern theories, such as Marxism and functionalism, are metanarratives and are based on values and assumptions. However, postmodernism could itself be described as being a metanarrative.
- Other factors may mean that sociologists cannot be value free in their research, e.g. who funds the research (such as governments not publishing findings it disagrees with) and sociologists' own careers (they may choose a popular topic to study that could further their career).

## Exam tip

Be prepared to relate methodological issues to the question of objectivity and value freedom. Interpretivist methods such as participant observation can lose objectivity if the researcher 'goes native'. While in 'objective' positivist methods such as questionnaires the researcher has imposed their own values on respondents by having pre-determined questions.

Hodder revision book: Crime + deviance (with theory + methods), Dave O'heary

