**Social Policy and Sociology**

THE EXAMS: In Paper 1 and 3 you could be ask to explore the relationship of social policy and sociology. It is also a question that could come up in the Family and Education sections.

**WHAT IS SOCIAL POLICY?**

It is generally thought of as the plans and actions of governments to tackle ‘social problems’. Many sociologists are interested in solving social problems e.g. poverty, educational underachievement, so much of their research produces policy proposals.

Worsley (1977) described a social problem as social behaviour that causes public and private misery. Whereas a sociological problem is any pattern of behaviour that needs explaining.

**Perspectives on social policy and sociology:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Feminist perspective on social policy & sociology** | |
| **How do they view society?** | See society as based on conflict but unlike Marxists this conflict is based on gender not class. They see society based on patriarchy (male dominated) benefiting men at women’s expense. |
| **What do they see as the role of the state?** | They see the state perpetuating women’s subordination through their social policies. E.g. the state bases its policies on the nuclear family so offers benefits to married couples & not cohabiting ones thus creating a self fulfilling policy by encouraging the nuclear family & making it difficult for other kinds of family |
| **What effect do they believe sociology has had on social policy?** | * They see their research as having an impact in education, they have seen changes in the images of female in teaching material – it is now more positive. Also teacher training now ensure they are sensitive to gender bias & encourages them to be inclusive. * Also the creation of women’s refuges for women escaping domestic violence. * Feminist movement has also had an impact on policy on equality – Sex Discrimination Act & the Equal Pay Act |
| **What are the criticisms of this perspective?** | Marxist & radical feminist reject the view that these changes in law can liberate women. They both argue that society needs more far-reaching changes that the existing state cannot deliver. |
| **Marxists perspective on social policy & sociology** | |
| **How do they view society?** | See society as divided by a fundamental conflict of interest in which the ruling capitalist class exploit the labour of the working class. The state represents the ruling class & its social policies serve the interests of capitalism, not society as a whole. |
| **What do they see as the role of the state?** | It represents the ruling class so its policies serve the interest of capitalism & not society as a whole. **Social Policy:**   * **Legitimises the ideological** by providing the welfare state, this helps to mask capitalism by making it appear that they care about the poor, sick & old. * **Maintains the labour force for further exploitation,** e.g. the NHS keeps workers fit enough to work. * **Is a means of preventing revolution** when class conflict threatens capitalism. E.g. the creation of the welfare state after the war was a way of making sure the WC did not rise up & oppose capitalism.   Social policy does sometimes provide real benefits to WC however the provision of benefits & services are constantly threatened by welfare cuts |
| **What effect do they believe sociology has on social policy?** | They see that reports like the Black report are easily buried by capitalism. They will not carry out such recommendations as they put profits before human needs |
| **What do they see as the role of the sociologist?** | To critisise capitalist social policy & reveal the exploitation that underpins capitalism & the way the ruling class uses social policies to mask this exploitation & prevent a revolution through minor concessions. |
| **What are the criticisms of this perspective?** | Their view is impractical & unrealistic. Social democrats criticise them for rejecting the idea that sociological research can bring about change in a capitalist system arguing that poverty research HAS had some positive impact on policy. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Positivism & Functionalism view on social policy & sociology** | |
| **How do they view society?** | Society is based on value consensus which is free from conflict |
| **What do they see as the role of sociology?** | Early positivists (Comte & Durkheim) viewed sociology as a science. They believed that through scientific research they could discover both the problems & solutions to society’s problems. So sociology’s role is to provide the state with objective scientific information that they can use to base their policies on. E.g. Durkheim’s research led to him proposing an education system based on merit & the abolition of inherited wealth, he argued that this would lead to a more cohesive society. |
| **What effect do they believe sociology should have on social policy?** | They saw the state as serving the interests of society as a whole. They would produce social policies that were for the good of all. So the policies help society run more smoothly & efficiently. E.g. Educational policies that promote equal opportunity.  Functionalists take a cautious approach, they tend to look at one issue at a time, this is called ‘***piecemeal social engineering’.*** |
| **What are the criticisms of this perspective?** | Marxists criticise this piecemeal approach, they argue that issues in wider society need to be tackled before specific issues can be addressed. E.g. Before you can produce an educational policy aimed at equalising opportunity for children from different classes, you need to tackle the bigger problem of inequality in society & bring about a change in the basic structure of society first. |
| **The New Rights perspective on social policy & sociology** | |
| **How do they view the states involvement in society?** | They believe the state should have a minimal involvement in society. They are opposed to the states involvement in the family, income support, education & health. They fell that this takes away people’s choices & takes away their feeling of responsibility. This they believe can lead to crime & delinquency.  Charles Murray (1984) argues that the welfare state gives ‘perverse incentives’, this weakens self reliance & encourages a dependency culture. |
| **What do they see as the role of sociologists with regard social policy?** | They want sociologists to come up with alternative policies to the existing ones. They want these new policies to restore the responsibility that the welfare state has taken away from individuals. They want individuals to take responsibility for their own & their families welfare rather than leaving it to the state.  In 2007 ***Social Justice policy Group*** (a conservative think tank) proposed a range of social policies aimed at the family:   * Marriage preparation - Parenting classes - Tax relief & benefits for mothers who stay at home with their kids   They see the role of social policy is to enable people to help themselves rather than have a welfare state do it for them. New Right thinking can therefore be seen to be favoured by the Conservatives & more recently New Labour |
| **What are the criticisms of this perspective?** | The quality of the data used in studies such as Murray’s, have been questioned. They have also been criticised for not using sociological studies using instead, politically biased think tanks. E.g. the study *Breakdown Britain was* produced by a think tank set up by Iain Duncan Smith, former leader of the Conservative party. So is that going to give an unbiased result? |
| **The social democratic perspective on social policy & sociology** | |
| **How do they view society?** | Society is based on inequality & conflict. They are politically left but not as extreme as Marxists |
| **What do they see as the role of sociology?** | Sociology researches social problems & make recommendations for policy that will get rid of inequalities in society |
| **What effect do they believe sociology should have on social policy?** | It would change the basic structure of society so that policies implemented will bring about more equality in society.  Peter Townsend (1979) researched poverty & recommended the government gave higher benefits to the poorest & spent more on welfare, education & health services  Black report (1980) looked at inequalities in health based on class – the report put forward 37 policy recommendations to reduce these inequalities, free school meals, improve working conditions, better benefits for the disabled & improve housing. Unfortunately there was a change in government before the report was published so none of the recommendations were implemented due to cost. |
| **What are the criticisms of this perspective?** | Marxists criticise this approach as it does not feel it does not go far enough. Marxists see capitalism as the problem & therefore policies need to abolish that. They use the way the Conservative government used the Black report as evidence that a capitalist state will never spend public money on improving the situation for the working classes.  Postmodernist criticise attempts by sociologists to influence policy due to their belief that all knowledge produced by research is only a version of the truth & therefore is not a satisfactory basis for policy. How can you make a law on the interpretation of a situation? |

There is an assumption that if traditional empirical sociological research shows up social problems then the government will respond by seeking to solve the problems on the basis of the evidence.

However this is not necessarily the case:

1. Ideological and policy preferences: Governments only act when there are groups powerful enough to have their views taken into account by politicians i.e. gay people are now seen as a potential source of votes and occupy powerful positions in society.
2. Interest groups: Pressure groups may enable chances to happen even if they are not in the interest of powerful groups
3. Globalisation: As we part of a Global community, policies need to be assessed and agreed by the UN etc
4. Electoral popularity : Governments rarely engage in radical or long term changes. They operate within fairly short-term timetables based on election periods and favour popularity. They are also reluctant to commit themselves to radical change for fear of losing votes
5. Cost: Some policy changes are not financially viable

**POLICIES RELEVANT TO THE TOPICS COVERED**

**The Sociology of Education (Paper 1)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Policy** | Problem addressed by this policy | Policy Perspective linked to this policy (if possible) |
| **Education Act 1944** |  |  |
| **Comprehensive education** |  |  |
| **Education Reform Act 1988** |  |  |
| **Marketization (1988 onward)** |  |  |
| **Introduction of GCSEs (1980s)** |  |  |
| **League tables (1988 onward)** |  |  |
| **Funding formula** |  |  |
| **EMA** |  |  |
| **Academies** |  |  |
| **Free schools** |  |  |
| **University fees** |  |  |
| **GCSE/A Level /BTEC reform 2015** |  |  |
|  |  |  |

***Types of questions:***

* Outline two educational reforms which might reduce “class-based differences in educational achievement” [4]
* Outline two reasons why a school’s position in examination ‘league tables’ may be an unsatisfactory measure of its worth or effectiveness [4]
* Outline three educational policies that may have affected educational attainment.[6]
* Analyse two changes in policies which may have led to improvements in girls’ performance [10]

**The Sociology of the Family (Paper 2)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Policy** | Problem addressed by this policy | Policy Perspective linked to this policy (if possible) |
| **Abortion Act 1967** |  |  |
| **Equal Pay Act 1970** |  |  |
| **Divorce Reform Act 1969/1971** |  |  |
| **Contraception becomes free on NHS 1974** |  |  |
| **Sex Discrimination Act 1975** |  |  |
| **Children Act (1989/1993/ 2004)** |  |  |
| **Civil Partnership Act 2004** |  |  |
| **Marriage (same sex couples act) 2013** |  |  |
| **Age restrictions** |  |  |
| **Equality Act (2010)** |  |  |
|  |  |  |

***Types of questions:***

* Outline and explain two ways social policy has had an impact on the nature of the family [10]
* Outline and explain two ways social policy has created a child centred society [10]
* Outline and explain two social policies that have had an impact on women choosing to have children later [10]

**The Sociology of Crime and Deviance (Paper 3)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Policy** | Problem addressed by this policy | Policy Perspective linked to this policy (if possible) |
| **Zero tolerance policing** |  |  |
| **ASBOs** |  |  |
| **Intervention approaches** |  |  |
| **Situational crime prevention e.g. CCTV** |  |  |
| **UN Convention of Human Rights** |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

***Types of questions:***

* Outline two criticisms of situational crime prevention strategies [4]
* Outline three approaches to punishing an offender [6]
* Analyse the effectiveness of two crime prevention strategies [10]

For Stratification you also need to consider relevant social policies.

**STRATIFICATION (Paper 2):**

Disability laws: PIP Race Relations Act/s Pensions Sutton Trust on social mobility Saunders on meritocracy Education/Family/Crime policies that have an impact on different social groups.

**Paper 1 and 3: Theory and Methods**

A more general social policy question could also come up in the theory and methods section of the exam. For example:

**QUESTION:** Outline and explain two arguments in favour of the view that sociological perspectives or research should have an influence on social policy.

**ANSWER:** Social democrats see sociology as able to have a positive influence on social policy. They share a similar view to positivists and functionalists that sociologists can have an impact on social policies and should investigate social problems and conduct research to make policy recommendations to governments to improve them. However, they adopt a more socialist approach and place an emphasis on the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. Townsend, for example, concluded in his research that there was a need for a fairer system and more public spending on health and education. His research on poverty in the UK challenged the government’s existing official poverty line and instead adopted a more relative approach to defining poverty i.e. to live not just exist. Under his relative measurement there were more people living in poverty in the UK than the government suggested. He concluded that the amount of benefits paid to those on income support should be increased to reduce the rate of poverty. However, Townsend’s research had very little influence on social policy, illustrating how, despite trying to be influential, sociological research might be ignored by governments.

Different feminists have different views of whether sociological perspectives and research should have an influence on social policy. Liberal feminists would suggest that feminist arguments and research in the 1970s and 1980s raised awareness of gender inequality in education and the family and have resulted in governments developing social policies to deal with issues raised, such as the Equal Pay Act (1970). Research done by feminists such as Stanworth on teacher attitudes and by Lobban on reading schemes has led to governments introducing policies to tackle gender stereotyping in the education system. Much like Marxists, however, radical feminists argue such social policies only serve to legitimise inequality that exists and that they have not addressed the way in which the education system perpetuates masculine hegemony through verbal abuse and double standards.

10/10

OR

**Essay plan: social policy**

Sociological research can make important contributions to the formulation of government social policies. Sociological evidence can help, for example: to identify and explain social problems: to assess how well existing policies are working (or why they are not) to identify the unintended consequences of existing policies and to develop new social policies to help solve social problems. However, social policy formation is often influenced by factors other than sociological research evidence.

**Applying item A and your knowledge, evaluate the extent to which sociological research may have an influence on the formation of government social policy (20)**

**Key areas of the question that you need to address:**

|  |
| --- |
| What does the question want? |
| **Introduction:** needs to address the debate and define key concepts in the question |
| How could you use the **item** |
| What key concepts will need to be included? |
| Evidence **for the argument** in the question (including named studies) |
| **Counter arguments** to these (including named studies) |
| Conclusion- weigh up the debate: based on the evidence you have presented |
| What will be in each of your 4/5 paragraphs?  1.  2.  3.  4.  5. |