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A2 Sociology for AQA

Chris Livesey & Tony Lawson

Hodder Arnold

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Finally, to paraphrase the mighty Arcade Fire:

Consider this text a tunnel.

Yeah, a tunnel – From my window to yours.
Meet me in the middle, the empty middle ground.

And since there's no one else around,
We'll let our time grow long,
And remember everything we've come to know.

Chris Livesey

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About This Book

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In writing this book we have tried to satisfy two main aims:

First, we wanted to retain a sense of continuity between this and our previous (AS) text in terms of both overall structure and scope, mainly for the benefit of those students and teachers who've used the AS text in their first year of the A-level course. In terms of structural continuity, therefore, the general layout will be familiar to anyone who has used **AS Sociology for AQA** (although it's not, of course, necessary to have used this AS text to get the most from the A2 text). More specifically, we've once again chosen to tie the text closely to the **AQA Specification** (highlighting, where appropriate, **synoptic links** within and between the A2 and AS Modules) and we've retained the basic structure of the AS text by dividing the sections into two parts: introductory material ('**Preparing the Ground**') provides a general overview of a section and is broadly aimed at students of all abilities, while more challenging material ('**Digging Deeper**') is included to both develop the initial material and stretch the more able student.

In addition, we've retained a couple of features we believe worked well in the AS text:

The **Key Word** focus, whereby the text is structured around significant concepts – a system designed to both help students to

focus on the most important ideas in a particular area and encourage planned examination answers.

Integrated exercises designed to achieve a variety of aims (mainly relating to the development of the interpretation, analysis and evaluative skills required at A2). These exercises involve three main types:

- **Warm-up** exercises appear at the start of a section and are designed to ease students into a topic by getting them to think about it in a way that builds on their existing knowledge. The basic idea here is to identify the knowledge students already possess about a topic or issue, something that provides a foundation for building a more sociological level of understanding. This type of exercise also serves as a whole-class ice-breaker for each new section of the course.
- **Growing It Yourself** exercises are more focused and, in general, they're designed for small group work. They usually require students to generate and discuss information, although, reflecting the increased demand for evaluative skills at this level, many of these exercises require students to make decisions about the information generated through discussion. This type of exercise is normally closely integrated with the surrounding text and is designed to complement student reading and note-taking by requiring

them to reflect on – and expand – the information presented through the text. Each exercise has been designed to flow naturally from the text and generally requires little or no prior preparation by students or teachers. Having said this, some of the exercises take the form of **simulations** that require students to take on various roles as part of the overall discussion process; these, reflecting the fact they are slightly more complex than the standard exercises, require a relatively simple level of prior organisation and preparation.

- **Discussion Points** provide opportunities for students to discuss or debate different ideas – something we felt would be useful to build into the overall design to help students clarify and express their thinking in a relatively structured way. Some of the discussion points are tightly-constructed around a particular issue, while others are more loosely constructed to allow students greater scope for discussion and debate.

In terms of our **second** aim, although structural continuity was important when designing this text, we also wanted to reflect the fact that A2 study involves both greater theoretical and evaluative depth.

In relation to the former we were conscious of the need to strike a balance between classical (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and the like) and contemporary sociological theory (writers such as Luhmann, Baudrillard and Foucault), on the basis that, while it's important for students and teachers to have access to contemporary material, we shouldn't lose sight of the classical origins of sociology (something we

feel is generally reflected in the structure of AQA A2 examination questions).

In terms of the latter we decided to add a couple of extra features to the A2 text.



The Potting Shed involves questions that reflect the structure of the smaller-mark exam questions (requiring students to 'identify and explain' something, for example). These short, relatively simple, questions have also been designed to help students make **synoptic links** between, for example, A2 and AS modules (once again reflecting the general structure of the smaller-mark AQA exam questions).



Weeding the Path: The most significant change between the A2 and AS text, reflecting the fact that A2 study requires students to use evaluation skills more rigorously than at AS, is the addition of clearly-signposted evaluation material. Although such material runs throughout the text (at its most basic, of course, being by juxtaposition) we felt it would be helpful to draw students' attention more specifically to this type of information.

Finally, although this A2 text, like its AS counterpart, is focused around helping students work their way successfully through the AQA A-level Sociology course, we hope we've managed to produce a text that, while informative and challenging to all abilities and interests, is one you will enjoy reading – not only because (we trust) it will help you achieve the best possible grade in your examination but also, more importantly perhaps, because we firmly believe that Sociology is a fascinating subject to study in its own right.

Theory and methods

This chapter examines a number of ideas related to sociological *methodology*; how, in short, we can produce *reliable* and *valid* knowledge about the social world, both in theoretical terms, such as different sociological theories, and in practical terms when, for example, we explore the relationship between sociological theory and *social policy*.

This chapter, therefore, is designed to enhance and complement the work you did on sociological *methods* at AS level.

1. Concepts of modernity and postmodernity in relation to sociological theory – consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories



Preparing the ground: Sociology and modernity

‘Sociology’, according to **Peter Taylor** (2000), ‘is a product of modernity’ – by which he means it has its origins, as an academic discipline, in the development of ‘modern society’. To understand why this is significant, we can initially classify our society in terms of three broad historical periods:

- **Pre-modern**, considered (very roughly) as a type of society existing before the late sixteenth century.
- **Modern**, a type that developed out of the pre-modern period and (arguably) stretches to the late twentieth century.

- **Postmodern** – a type considered by some sociologists (others, such as **Giddens** (1998) or **Habermas** (1992) refer to this period as ‘high’ or ‘late’ modernity) to be characteristic of our society in the twenty-first century.

This, as we stress, is a very *basic classification* used primarily to sensitise you to the concept of different types of society. Its secondary purpose is to allow us to identify some *key features* (economic, political and cultural) of modern society that arguably differentiate it from both its pre- and postmodern counterparts.

WARM-UP: SOCIETIES AS SHOPS

In this exercise we can use an analogy to understand the difference between types of society. Think of:

- pre-modern society as a corner shop
- modern society as a supermarket
- postmodern society as shopping on the internet.

In small groups, identify some of the features that characterise the different types of shops (a mall, for example, is much larger than a corner shop, it has more choice and involves different types of relationship between customer and staff).

As a class, discuss how these differences can be applied to different types of society.

Economic characteristics

Modernity differs from *pre-modernity* in a number of ways:

Technology: The invention of machines – and the gradual discovery/invention of new sources of power (gas, electricity and, eventually, nuclear, for example) – opened up the potential for:

- **Industrialisation** – the application of machine technology to the production of things (*commodities*). People working with machines (*mechanisation*) led to the development of factories that allowed large quantities of goods to be produced quickly, cheaply and to the same general standard (*mass production*). Further developments included *automation* (machines controlling other machines, with little or no direct human involvement) and, most recently, the *computerisation* of some production processes.

Alongside these developments, modern society is characterised by:

Capitalist economic relationships ('employer–employee', for example) that involve a process of:

Rationalisation, in the sense of ideas about organisation and efficiency being applied to the production process. As **Sarup**

(1993) puts it, modernity involves '... the progressive economic and administrative rationalisation ... of the social world'. For **Weber** (1905), rationalisation involved *institutions* (such as work) and *practices* becoming increasingly well organised and efficient. Examples of different types of economic rationalisation include:

- **Fordism:** Named after the production-line technique developed by the US car manufacturer Henry Ford at the beginning of the twentieth century. With this technique a complex task, such as assembling a car, is broken down into a number of smaller, relatively simple tasks.



The potting shed

Modern supermarkets are contemporary examples of rationally organised institutions. Identify and briefly explain two ways 'selling food' is broken down into highly specialised roles.

- **Global Fordism:** Where *Fordism* involves production-line principles applied *within* a factory, this version involves different parts of a product being created in different countries (where labour and parts may be relatively inexpensive) and assembled in yet another country.
- **Just-in-time (JIT):** Involves bringing together the parts needed to create a product 'just in time' to sell the completed product (thereby saving on things like storage costs).

For **Weber**, a further feature that developed alongside *rationalisation* was:

Bureaucracy, which **Ritzer** (1996) describes as 'a large-scale organisation

composed of a hierarchy of offices ... people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and ... compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions’.

A final characteristic we can add (with the proviso that there is some dispute as to whether this is characteristic of *modernity* or *postmodernity*) is:

Globalisation, considered in terms of ideas such as:

- **Global Fordism.**
- **Transnational corporations** that operate and trade on a global scale. Areas such as *telecommunications* (BT, for example) and *computer software* (think Microsoft – which sounds a bit like subliminal advertising) are contemporary examples of global marketplaces for transnational companies.

Political characteristics

Modernity involves ideas like:

- **Nation states:** Although ‘a nation’ may exist in some pre-modern societies, a *nation state* is a feature of modernity – the basic idea being that *states* develop systems of national government with some form of political representation (a parliament, for example), legal system, civil service and fixed geographic borders.
- **Representation:** This doesn’t have to be *democratic* – many early-modern nation states involved monarchies, and even into the twentieth century a range of totalitarian societies have existed (Germany, Italy, Spain and the USSR, for example), but political democracy is a feature of most Western societies in the twenty-first century.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: Note how the above ideas about the origin and nature of the state underpin discussion of the role of the state in modern society.

If we turn the focus slightly to the idea of *modernity* itself (as a way of thinking about and understanding the social and natural worlds), we can explore the:

Cultural characteristics of modern society, mainly because modernity involved major changes in the way people experience and interpret the world (something that led to the development of both sociology and many other forms of intellectual endeavour).

Cultural characteristics

The obvious place to start, in this respect, is with the concept of:

Belief systems which, for our current purpose, we can examine in terms of:

The Enlightenment: Harvey (1990) argues that the origins of *modernity* as a belief are in the explosion of creative thinking and practice that began in late seventeenth-century Europe. As Scambler and Higgs (1998) argue: ‘Modernity refers to Western society over the past 200 years, with its triumphs of medicine and science, beliefs in social progress and improvement, and the emergence of mass institutions such as hospitals, schools, and the nation state, as well as mass production. Social theory ... has its roots in the project of modernity.’

The philosopher and social reformer Thomas Paine (1795) called the Enlightenment the ‘Age of Reason’, with good reason (pun intended) because it involved rejecting the ‘ignorance and superstition’ of pre-modernity and embracing

a rational understanding of the natural and social worlds – an idea that introduces a major defining feature of modernity:

Science: For O’Donnell (1997)

modernity is: ‘... a period during which science and reason become the main means by which human beings seek to understand the world and solve problems ... modernity is driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand and change, in short, to master the world’; and the impact of scientific thought was – and continues to be – felt in terms of:

Objectivity: Scientific beliefs involve the idea that it’s possible to both discover and create knowledge through objective observations. In other words, both the natural world (the object of study) and the scientific method are based on:

Foundational principles or assumptions.

In the former, the world is subject to ‘laws’ governing behaviour and in the latter, objective science can be used to discover these laws (based, for example, on the foundational principle of ‘cause and effect’).

Science, therefore, is a very powerful method of explaining the world, for two reasons:

- **Truth** can be separated from fallacy (*fiction*). A classic example is the religious suppression of Galileo’s argument that the Earth revolved around the Sun (and not the other way around, as the Catholic Church hierarchy believed). For a time this idea was successfully suppressed, but its *demonstrable truth* was simply too powerful to deny. Under modernity, therefore, *objective truths* replace *subjective faiths* as the primary form of explanation.
- **Instrumental utility:** Keat and Urry (1975) note that one of the most powerful features of science is that ‘it works’ – scientific thinking and principles have a use in the ‘real world’ of cars, computers and compact disks.

From this, it’s only a short step to the concept of:

Progress – the idea that, as we understand more and more about the natural world, modern society is constantly ‘moving

Discussion point: Can things only get better?

Split into two groups. One group should identify the *benefits* of science and the other should identify its *drawbacks*.

As a class, discuss the benefits/drawbacks you’ve identified (some, you’ll find, have *both*).

Benefits	Drawbacks
Longer life expectancy The eradication of disease (such as smallpox)	Nuclear war? Genetic modifications
Further examples?	

forward' – from superstition to science, ignorance to knowledge and, finally, from subservience to mastery of nature.

Once the natural world has been 'mastered' (or at least its foundational principles understood), it's but a small step to the idea of mastery of the social world; if the inanimate world of 'things' is governed by natural laws, perhaps the same is true of the animated world of people?



Digging deeper: Modernity and sociological theory

Given sociology's origins in 'the modern period', it's not surprising that the founders of the discipline (writers such as **Saint-Simon**, **Comte** and **Durkheim** in France, **Weber** and **Marx** in Germany and **Spencer** in England) were immersed in the general philosophies and principles of modernist social thought. **Lechner** (1998) notes: 'Modernity is the central concern of sociology as a discipline ... In its early period, sociology aimed to illuminate ... the changes that were remaking Europe and America ... it dealt with the consequences of industrialization and urbanization in leading nation-states ... [as] part of a broader debate about the meaning of social change.'

Sociology in the early modern period (from **Saint-Simon** onwards) was concerned with the description and explanation of modernity and its associated processes. To paraphrase **O'Donnell** (1997), sociology was initially driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand, change and – possibly – master the social world. In this section, therefore, we're going to explore a couple of areas:

- **Themes:** involves relating some of the basic concepts of 'modernist sociology' to the cultural themes of modernity we outlined above.
- **Perspectives:** we can examine *consensus*, *conflict* and *social action* theories and their relationship to both *modernity* and *postmodernity*.

Themes

In terms of the first of these ideas, therefore, in many of the classic texts of 'modernist sociology' we can see the basic themes of eighteenth/nineteenth-century thought:

Science represents one of the key ideas for classical sociology, since sociology, as the 'science of society', was founded on a number of assumptions that dovetailed neatly with modernity:

Structure over action: Just as behaviour in the natural world was subject to certain *objective forces* (laws of gravity, for example), social behaviour was subject to 'social forces' that pushed people into *action*. Different sociologists did, of course, have different views about the nature and extent of these forces:

- **Consensus** theorists (such as **Comte** and **Durkheim**) focused on forces of *order* and *stability* – in the case of the former, the attempt to isolate the laws governing social behaviour; in the latter case, laws governing *social statics* (order) and *dynamics* (change).
- **Conflict** theorists (such as **Marx**) focused on forces of *conflict* and *change* (such as the idea of class struggle).

Whatever their difference of emphasis and approach, the underlying belief was similar: these forces could be discovered using



The X-Files

A modernist preoccupation with 'truth' and 'certainty' in a mixed-up postmodern world? Or just a daft TV programme about aliens?

scientific methods (such as detailed *observation*, *theory* development and *objective testing*) – a belief that reflected an underlying modernist certainty that 'the truth', to coin a phrase, was 'Out There Somewhere'. The task of *any* scientist was to find it.

Thus, if behaviour was subject to 'underlying forces', this presupposed:

Regularity: There was a *logic* to behaviour based on the various ways cultural behaviour was structured by 'unseen forces' that could be both *theorised* and *observed*:

Theorised: If behaviour isn't random, unstructured and meaningless, it follows that we can speculate about its causes.

Observed in terms of its effects (using various indicators). In dealing with objective forces, observation had to be similarly objective, structured and free from subjective judgements, in other words:

Empirical: *Objectivity* and *value freedom* are, for modernist theory, non-negotiable; if the aim is to find undiscovered or obscured truth, scientists must be objective in their theory and practice since, if they were not,

we could not be certain a truth had really been discovered.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion: 'Secularisation' (a decline in religious belief and behaviour) is, for some sociologists, a 'hidden process' that cannot be directly observed; its existence, however, can be theorised by studying observable indicators of its effect.

Essentialism: All varieties of early modern sociology contained a belief in human behaviour/societies having fundamental (*essential*) organisational features, an idea reflected in the concept of:

Progress: For both consensus and conflict sociology the idea of a progressive revelation of 'scientific truths' was a fundamental goal. In this respect, the concept of *progress* is found in much of classical sociology – from writers as diverse as **Saint-Simon** (*Fonseca* and *Ussher* (1999) point to his call, in the early eighteenth century, for a 'science of society' having parity with the natural sciences), **Comte** (and his vision of society governed by a 'scientific priesthood' based on their understanding and mastery of the 'laws of human behaviour'), **Marx** (with his scientific critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and the vision of a future, communist society) and **Weber** (who saw the rational ordering of society as an achievable goal).

Finally, we can note how classical sociology gave rise to two forms of scientific *methodology*:

- **positivism**, mainly associated with *consensus* sociology, and
- **realism**, mainly associated with *conflict* sociology.

Perspectives

Modernist sociology, as we've suggested, has historically been dominated by *structuralist perspectives*, the basic themes of which we can review next, beginning with:

Consensus structuralism, which involves, for **Giddens** (2001), a focus on the way agreement over '... basic social values by the members of a group, community or society' is both socially constructed and a fundamental characteristic of social behaviour. The persistence of society, therefore, is based around a:

Common value system involving 'consensual beliefs held by the majority of the population'. Value systems are organised around:

Social institutions – patterns of shared, stable behaviour that persist over time and around which modern societies are structured in terms of:

- **economic** institutions (work, for example)
- **political** institutions (government, police, judiciary, and so forth)
- **cultural** institutions (such as religion, education and the media).

Each institution (or set of related institutions) is *functional* for society because they are connected by their:

- **Purpose** – what each institution exists to do (the function of economic institutions is to provide the physical means to survive; the function of the family is primary socialisation, and so forth).
- **Needs** – what each institution takes from other institutions in order to function. Work, for example, needs the family to produce socialised individuals and, in return, provides the means of family group survival.

Themes

This perspective is related to a couple of the main themes of modernism:

Foundationalism: The concept of *function* – the basic *foundation* on which consensus theory rests – takes a number of forms, an example of which is:

- **Functional imperative** (a command that must be obeyed): Each social institution is functionally connected to other, related institutions on the basis of the functions they must perform if a society is to survive and prosper (*purpose* and *needs*, in other words).
- **Structure:** Because institutions are *functionally linked*, we experience society in terms of pressures and constraints on our behaviour (the pressure to work, form a family, and so forth). In this respect, society is a *hidden hand* pushing people to perform the roles required for the reproduction of social order. **Durkheim** (1895) identified two significant aspects of order:
 - **Social solidarity** – the feeling we both belong to a society and have certain basic things in common: culture, socialisation, values and the like.
 - **Collective conscience** – the 'external expression' of the will of the people. This is the force that binds people to each other as a society (to integrate them into collective forms of behaviour).
- **Essentialism:** **Parsons** (1951) argued that every institution needs to solve four *essential problems* if it is to exist and function:
 - **Goal attainment** involves the need to



Growing it yourself: Fun with GAIL

Although functional imperatives apply to any institution, Parsons (1959) explicitly identified the functional imperatives for an *education system*. Using the following table as a template (we've given you some examples to get you started), how do schools perform the following essential functions?

Goal attainment	Adaptation	Integration	Latency
Qualifications	The school	Uniforms	School rules
Further examples?			

set behavioural goals and to specify the means through which they can be achieved.

- **Adaptation** involves *creating* the means to achieve valued goals. This may, for example, involve the ability to provide the *physical necessities* of institutional life.
- **Integration**: People need to feel a part of any institution and one way to achieve this is to provide something they have in common (norms and values, for example). The ability of an institution to successfully integrate people is crucial for its internal harmony and reproduction.
- **Latency** (or pattern maintenance) refers to the development of *social control* mechanisms to manage tensions, motivate people, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and so forth.

Perspectives

Conflict structuralism focuses, according to **Bilton et al. (1996)** on 'the notion that society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterised by a conflict of interests between the advantaged and the

disadvantaged'. It encompasses perspectives such as *Marxism* (conflict between social classes) and *feminism* (gender conflicts) and can be related to the main themes of modernism in terms of:

Foundationalism: Conflicts of interest, as we've just noted, are central to this perspective. For Marxists, a key term is:

Social class, where class conflict creates social change through the opposition of classes as they pursue their different *collective* interests. For Marxists, classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the:

Means of production – the social process whereby goods are created. For *traditional* Marxism, capitalist society consists of two great classes:

- **the bourgeoisie** – those who own and control the means of production
- **the proletariat** – those who sell their labour in the economic marketplace.

Modern forms of Marxism, however, tend to note the existence of:

Class fractions (subdivisions of each main class). For example, the bourgeoisie (or ruling class) might be subdivided into the:

- **bourgeoisie** (owners of large companies)

- **petit (small) bourgeoisie** (owners of small businesses) and
- **professionals** (such as academics or managers who control the day-to-day running of companies).

Essentialism: Different forms of conflict theory have slightly different essential features. Marxism, for example, focuses on areas such as the economic structure of society as the key to understanding human behaviour and development. Radical feminists, meanwhile, focus on the essential features of males and females in terms of, for example, their different psychologies.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: These ideas are developed in more detail in relation to ideas about – and consequences of – the changing class structure.



Preparing the ground: Sociology and postmodernity

The idea of postmodern society is a *contested concept* within sociology in that, although economic and cultural changes are clearly occurring, there are arguments about whether these changes relate to a *new type* of (postmodern) society or are simply a *different form* of modern society – what **Giddens** (1998) calls *late modernity* or ‘modernisation happening under different conditions from the past’. Whatever your position on this argument, we’ve split this section into a discussion of:

- **Late modernity** – considered, for theoretical convenience, to include sociological theories (such as

interactionist sociology) from the mid- to late twentieth century and

- **Postmodernity** – considered in terms of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, where we look at some possible characteristics of postmodern society.

We can identify some of the main features of late/postmodernity in the following terms.

Economic characteristics

Writers such as **Bell** (1973) suggest that a major economic change in the late twentieth century was the development of:

Post-industrial society, with an emphasis on the *provision of services* (banking, insurance, etc.) rather than the *production of goods* (a feature of modern society) – something that involves an increasing emphasis on *knowledge* (ideas about how to do things) as a saleable commodity. For **Bell**, post-industrial society was based on three main characteristics:

- **Service:** Most people would be employed in service industries, from the low-level, poorly paid and insecure (shopworking, call centres and the like) to the high-level, handsomely rewarded and relatively secure (information technology, computing, finance, and so forth).
- **Science:** The development of computer technology, applied to the production of *goods* and *services*, that would revolutionise how things were made and distributed.
- **Consumption:** In modernity, *producers* of goods and services, rather than consumers, were the dominant economic force; in postmodernity, the reverse is true. Through information technology (such as the internet) the consumer

exercises *choice* that exposes producers to such fierce competition that the consumer becomes the main focus of economic activity.

the construction of individual identities. **Bauman (1997)**, for example, questions the importance of class as a source of identity in postmodernity.

*** SYNOPTIC LINK**

Stratification and differentiation: This type of economic change has had important consequences for both the way we define and measure social class (traditionally involving occupation as a crucial indicator) and the significance of concepts like class in

Post-industrial society, **Bell** argued, developed in the heavily industrialised societies of the USA and Western Europe and would, eventually, spread across the world. The UK, for example, saw a steady decline throughout the twentieth century in the economic significance of, first,



Growing it yourself: Can you do it?

Read the following:

You can do it, if you B&Q it

Source: Heather Stewart, *The Guardian* 06/12/03

‘Manton Colliery – Sharing Success’ reads the blue crest on the pit wheel of what was once one of the most productive coal mines in the country. Silent since the pit was shut almost 10 years ago, the wheel now sits embedded in the grass – a monument to an economy which has disappeared.

Stacked on top of those memories, though, will soon be pallets of bathroom tiles, power tools and six-inch nails – and 1,000 new jobs . . . There could be few better symbols of the changing shape of Britain’s economy over the last decade than a once-mighty coal mine levelled off to make room for a giant distribution centre for DIY bits and bobs.

In 1996, the claimant count in Bassetlaw was close to 4,000; the latest figures show that has fallen to just over 1,000, many of whom should be swept up by B&Q with its on-site gym and its crèche to help mums get into work. The firm says it wants to have more women, and more part-time workers, than at its average distribution centre.

Split into two groups and use the following table as the basis for:

- Group 1 identifying positive aspects of this economic change
- Group 2 identifying negative aspects of this economic change.

As a class, consider the conclusions that can be drawn from these changes.

Positive	Negative
New forms of employment?	Job insecurity?

agriculture (which now accounts for about 3% of all employment) and, second, manufacturing (now roughly 20% of all employment). The past 30 years have seen a sharp decline in heavy industry (such as coal-mining and steel production) and a rapid rise in computer-based, service technologies – something that's partly accounted for by the increasing *rationality* of economic production. Economic decisions, in this respect, are made in *global*, rather than national, contexts, partly because of the behaviour and influence of:

Transnational corporations: Where corporations are able to operate freely across national borders (moving capital, production and even people from one country to the next) it becomes difficult for *national governments* to control the behaviour of such corporations. To take one example, the development of cheap international communications has meant call-centre jobs once based in the UK can now just as easily be based in countries such as India, where labour costs are lower.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The behaviour and influence of transnational companies has a significant impact on the role of the state in modern societies.



Weeding the path

Not everyone necessarily subscribes to the idea of a post-industrial society. **Harvey** (1990) argues that there has simply been a gradual change in the nature of economic production, away from:

Fordist models of accumulation based

around what **Postero** (2005) characterises as mass production, rigid labour relationships and centralised production processes, towards:

Flexible accumulation involving the combination of a range of ideas **Harvey** characterises as:

- **Flexibility** across all areas – from the way goods and services are produced (products created in different countries and assembled in their ‘home markets’, for example), through *labour markets* (people employed on short-term contracts and being prepared to seek work across national frontiers), to *consumption patterns* (where people are encouraged to seek out new products and experiences).
- **New production sectors:** The constant development and refinement of services, the seeking out of new markets and ‘... above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organisational innovation’.
- **Time and space compression:** With computer technology making global communication quicker (instantaneous at times), the world appears ‘smaller’, enabling transnational corporations to coordinate the manufacture of goods and the provision of services in a wide range of countries. Examples here might be the development of internet-based companies such as the book retailer Amazon.

Flexible accumulation, therefore, involves a complex interplay of ideas and activities, from the:

Global Fordism of car manufacturers where **Harvey** notes ‘... production is spread out, complexly intertwining across the globe like a spider web – Japanese cars

are made with Korean parts in the United States', to the behaviour of:

Cyberspace companies such as eBay, a company that hardly exists in the physical sense of buildings and factories.

These ideas reflect what **Goldman et al.** (1995) argue is a significant development, unique to postmodern society:

Agile corporations – a 'new type of transnational corporation' that developed at the end of the twentieth century. These operate globally (coordinating production, distribution and exchange across a number of markets, countries and continents) and are alert to economic and cultural developments and changes.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: We can link these ideas into Sabel's (1991) concept of unbounded networks (economic networks that have no boundaries).

Political characteristics

The political characteristics of late/postmodernity are many and varied, but some significant ideas we can note are:

Nation states that came into being in the modern period steadily *decline* in significance, gradually being replaced by one – or both – of the following:

- **International states** that take two potential forms:
 - **Real**, as in something like the European Union where nation states (Britain, Germany, France, and so forth) form a much larger, international, political bloc. The EU, for example, has its own elected parliament, and individual member

states abide by a range of common political and legal agreements.

- **Virtual:** In this situation people transcend national boundaries through communication systems like the internet. Virtual communities of like-minded individuals and groups can 'meet' and interact in cyberspace.
- **Local states:** As nation states dissolve, local or regional communities (and identities) become more important to people. **Chiu et al.** (1997) argue that places like Hong Kong resemble the 'walled city states' of pre-modern societies.

These ideas have implications for concepts of identity; the global movement of people, commodities and knowledge, for example, makes the idea of 'a nation' increasingly difficult to sustain in postmodern society and also impacts on ideas about:

Community: This is an important concept for both sociology in general and modernist sociology (especially conflict and consensus perspectives) in particular, since it represents a significant source of *personal* and *social identity*. **Bellah** (1985) suggests that a community consists of people who:

- are socially **interdependent**
- **participate** in discussion and decision-making
- **share practices** that define and nurture a sense of community.

The concept of community, in modernist social theory, is frequently used to underscore the idea of categories such as class, age, gender, ethnicity and region (both local and national) as sources of identity. In other words, a clearly defined sense of community provides support for identities

based around these categories, since they are:

Solid referents: Within *modernist theory*, gender, for example, has a relatively clear meaning in that it refers to both *biological* categories (male and female) and *social* categories (masculine and feminine) that reflect this basic biological division.

Postmodern social theory, however, questions this notion of community and, by extension, the kinds of theory on which it's based – within postmodernity, for example, the usefulness of concepts like class and gender as the basis for analysing behaviour is questioned. We can understand this by thinking in terms of what **Hudgins** and **Richards** (2000) call 'traditional approaches to understanding community' that stress, as in the **Bellah** example, things like:

- **physical proximity**
- **face-to-face interaction**
- **primary social relationships**
- **commitment** to shared meanings and beliefs
- **centred identities.**

Community

Hudgins and **Richards** suggest that, in postmodern society, concepts of community based on 'shared social spaces' (physically interacting with people) and 'community as a source of meaning and identity' may change. As they put it: 'What happens to the spatial sense of community, for example, in an era of hyperspace in which our modern concepts of space are meaningless; in which space has been annihilated and spatial barriers have disappeared?'

Rosenau (1992) further argues that, in postmodern society, the concept of

community changes (she refers to the notion of 'community without unity' – the idea that we still look to 'the community' for a sense of meaning and identity, but this 'community' may exist only in a *virtual world* of people with whom we interact but never meet). In terms of social theory, therefore, postmodern explanations of behaviour are radically different to modernist explanations, if for no other reason than the fact that they view the concept of 'society' (and, by extension, concepts of community and identity) in radically different ways – an idea that leads us to consider the cultural characteristics of postmodern society.

Cultural characteristics

Belief systems: Postmodern societies are characterised by multiple belief systems – in terms of differences *between* economic, political and cultural systems and *within* such systems. **Lyotard** (1984) argues that one consequence of this:

Diversity of belief systems is an 'incredulity towards grand narratives'; people are increasingly *unlikely* to believe 'all-encompassing explanations' that claim to explain 'everything about something'. This includes explanations produced by *religions* (Christianity, Islam), *politicians* (conservatism, socialism), *philosophers* (Marxism, fascism) and – of particular interest here – *scientists*. This sense of 'incredulity' represents a form of:

Anti-essentialism – the idea that it is impossible to reduce complex systems (such as societies) to their 'essential features' – for example, that 'gendered behaviour' can be explained in terms of the 'essential qualities' of males and females (their genetic, biological or psychological differences, for example). The 'search for essence' is, for

postmodernists, a peculiarly *modernist* quest, one related to the concept of:

Truth: In modernist theory ‘truth’ is an essence; it represents the idea that it is possible to distinguish *objectively* between truth and falsity such that we can demonstrate that something is ‘true for all time’.

Postmodern *anti-essentialism*, however, sees ‘truth’ as a socially constructed category – nothing in the social world ‘exists’ outside of ideology and social construction. In other words, ‘truth’ is both *ideological* (defined from a particular viewpoint) and *relative*; my truth may not necessarily be your truth – and even if it is, this truth may not survive into the future.

Relativity

These ideas have important consequences for how we understand concepts of sociological theory and science (discussed in the following section) – mainly because ‘The Truth’ is not ‘Out There’ waiting to be discovered in some objective way. Rather, ‘truth’ is *always* a *relative* concept, constructed from the subjective ways people experience and understand their world. If we accept this idea, it follows that a concept such as:

Progress is a subjective concept that cannot be measured quantitatively. It is simply one more form of ideological construction (or *discourse*, as postmodernists describe it).

In the above we’ve outlined some basic ideas relating to the idea of late/postmodern society, and it was in the light of such changes throughout the twentieth century that sociology took a distinctive turn, away from a preoccupation with *structure* and towards thinking about *agency*. We can examine this idea by thinking, first, about *interactionist* perspectives, and second, *postmodern* perspectives.

Interactionism is a generic name we give to a range of positions (symbolic interaction, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, for example) that ‘reversed the theoretical gaze’ – away from a preoccupation with *structures* and onto a consideration of human *agency*. In this respect, we can begin by noting that, for interactionists, the theoretical focus is on:

Action over structure: Interactionist perspectives focus on the individual – rather than ‘society’ or ‘social structure’ – as the primary unit of analysis. Understanding how and why people construct and reconstruct the world on a daily basis is, therefore, the main object of interest for this type of sociology. As Heise (1996) puts it: ‘Interactionism emphasizes the force of shared culture and individual agency in human interaction [and offers] a view of society as constantly reinvented by individual people applying their shared culture to solve immediate problems’. This, he argues, leads to:

Society representing the ‘... net outcome of active individuals dealing with daily challenges’. In other words, when we talk about ‘society’ we can do so only ‘as if’ it were a real force; from this perspective society is something we create, in our minds and through our behaviours, to express a sense of social solidarity and belonging.

Micro sociology

To explain human behaviour, therefore, we need to study social interaction at the *micro* level – that of people going about their daily lives. From this perspective neither *society* nor *reality* are things that can be studied separately from people because they are:

Negotiated abstractions: Schutz (1962) argued that ‘subjective meanings give rise to an apparently objective social world’. In



Growing it yourself: Creating the world

For this exercise you need to split into groups and each take a particular area of the social world to analyse (obvious choices might be education, which we've used as an illustration, family, crime, religion, and so forth).

Each group should identify the 'things we do to create' education (or whatever) and also the various ways our creation 'reflects back' on us to be experienced as a 'structural force'.

Things we do to create [education]	How our creation reflects back on behaviour
Attend Create authority structures Obey norms	Organisational rules Classroom norms
Further examples?	

other words, our individual (subjective) behaviours give rise to *apparently* objective social structures (*abstractions*) that 'reflect back' on the behaviour we originally created.

The concept of *negotiated reality* brings into question the idea of 'objectivity'; if a world we experience objectively (such as going to school) is actually the result of the subjective behaviour and intentions of many individuals, we can similarly understand 'education' only subjectively, in terms of how people experience this elaborate 'structural fiction'. **Wilson** (2002) expresses this in terms of:

Intersubjectivity, where 'we experience the world with and through others. Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human actions'. In other words, the social world – its 'social artefacts and cultural objects' – consists of *phenomena* whose meaning is both *negotiated* and *interpreted* through social interaction. For example, we may learn something through personal

experience ('fire burns') that we pass on to others who may then incorporate it in to their own belief system. In school, for example, you build on the work done by previous human beings – as **Wilson** argues, in geography you don't have to sail around the globe to 'map countries of the world (although someone once did have to do just that)', just as in PE you don't have to invent football before you can play it.

In terms of sociological theory, these ideas run *counter* to early modernist notions that social behaviour can be theoretically isolated and empirically studied (the idea of *essentialism* . . .); such ideas and research techniques are simply not going to work in the kind of world described by interactionists, governed by subjective beliefs and processes like:

Categorisation: To help us keep track of our lives and interact successfully in wider society, we 'group related phenomena' by developing stereotypical categories that help

maintain a sense of order and stability in a potentially chaotic world. This gives rise to the concept of:

Labelling: The labels we devise ('mother', 'criminal' and the like) define the nature of the social categories we create. In late/postmodern societies people increasingly behave towards each other on the basis of the labels each attracts from others, mainly because face-to-face interaction may be limited (or, as in the virtual world, non-existent). Some labels can be considered:

Master labels because they are so powerful they condition *every* aspect of our behaviour towards the person so labelled (think about the consequences of being labelled a 'terrorist', for example). The labels we attract, either through choice (*achievement*) or through imposition (*ascription*), are important because knowledge of a label serves to unlock the assumptions we hold about particular social categories and, of course, conditions the way we feel it appropriate to behave towards someone.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Labelling theory is an important explanation of both crime and deviance.



Digging deeper: Postmodernity and sociological theory

We can dig a little deeper into late/postmodern social theory by, first, developing some ideas about:

Interactionist sociology

Like the structuralist (consensus and

conflict) theories we've discussed previously, Interactionist sociology is rooted in modernist ideas about the possibility of explaining the social world in ways that are both *reliable* and *valid* – although, as we've discussed, its theoretical focus is very different. The main question we need to address, however, is, to paraphrase Heise (1996), how do the 'minute-by-minute behaviour inventions of millions of individuals culminate in the machine-like daily order' that, to take only one example, educates us in schools and colleges across the country? How, in other words, is social order possible if 'society' consists of people 'going about their individual lives'?

Networks

The answer, Heise suggests, is '... society emerges from the creative activities of enculturated individuals'. In other words, patterns of behaviour – how they originate and develop in terms of social groups – can be understood in terms of:

Social networks based, according to Cook (2001), on two features:

- **Nodes** – defined as people (individuals or groups) in a particular network. 'The only requirement for a node,' according to Cook, 'is that it must be able to relate in some manner to other nodes' – something that leads to the concept of:
- **Ties** – or the relationships between two *nodes* (that can be many and varied – think about the range of relationships within your sociology class, for example). *Ties* (a relationship people recognise) are generated through *shared meanings* based around role-play – for example, the tie between a teacher and a student in an educational network. Group networks are

also *not* self-contained; they involve links to other social networks, which leads to the development of larger networks and, ultimately, a sense of *social structure*.

Cook refers to the connections *between* networks as:

Bridging ties – a relationship that ‘connects two otherwise distant portions of a network’. Continuing the educational theme, a class teacher plays a bridging role here because they link a specific class into the wider structure of the educational network. Individual students may also represent bridging ties by, for example, linking a school into a parental network. In this way we can see how, according to **Heise** and **Durig** (1997):

- **Micro-actions** – the actions of individuals – lead to:
- **Macro-actions** – routines that shape the behaviour and structure of large organisational networks.

Before we move on to consider a different approach to understanding the construction of social systems, we can note that, in **Heise’s** (1996) formulation, *network theory* – what he terms:

Affect control theory – can be used to explain how ‘the majestic order of society emerges from repetitive application of evolved cultural resources to frame and solve recurrent problems’ – social structures result from people’s repeated, meaningful actions within social networks.



Weeding the path

Although this is one way contemporary modernist theory examines and explains the development of social structures, we can explore an *alternative explanation* that reflects a more *structuralist* preoccupation with social order, namely **Luhmann’s** (1995) concept of:

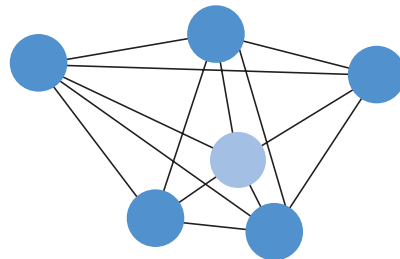


Growing it yourself: The ties that bind

This concept of social networks is one based on the idea of a **role set** (a group of related roles). In this exercise, you’re required to construct a social network diagram for your class, showing the relationships that exist within this network.

To help you, we’ve constructed a simple network example (five students focused on one teacher).

In your example, you should not only show the ties within the network; you should also indicate how this particular network (the school class) links to additional networks both within and outside education.



Simple social network showing nodes and indicating ties

Systems theory

Where something like *affect control theory* argues that *complex systems* are created through the purposeful actions of individuals, **Luhmann's systems theory** argues the reverse; he begins from the idea of a 'world system' (all societies in the modern world are in some way connected) and, effectively, *works backwards* to an explanation of individual social action. To understand how this works we need to think about societies as:

Complex systems: **Luhmann** assumes human behaviour is generally characterised by complexity, considered in terms, for example, of the number and range of possible relational combinations across the social world. In addition, this level of complexity introduces the idea of:

Chaos: If social life is (essentially) based on conscious individuals making behavioural choices across a range of groups and social networks, it's difficult to see how social order can be created and maintained; in other words, if we focus on the idea that networks are built *upwards* – from individuals at the bottom to systems at the top – it's difficult to explain how individual behaviours (in terms of the possible behavioural choices people can make in any given situation) can produce a relatively orderly and predictable social system.

Luhmann suggest this is possible only if we think in terms of systems *imposing* an order and stability on individual behaviour that is, in turn, sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual choice and deviation. The question here, according to **Vandenberghe** (1998), is how 'the social ordering of chaos' comes about, and the answer involves:

Autopoiesis ('auto-poe-ee-sis'):

According to **Maturana and Varela** (1980), autopoiesis involves an organisation (such as a social system) being *self-reproductive*; in other words, **Luhmann** sees social systems as both:

- **Autonomous** – systems effectively operate 'independently' of people. They are able to do this, for **Luhmann**, because societies are not 'things' or 'structures', as such, but *communication networks*.
- **Self-maintaining** – through their involvement 'in' and use of 'the system', people effectively contribute to its reproduction.

According to **Krippendorff** (1986), an *autopoietic system* '... produces its own organisation and maintains and constitutes itself ... for example, a living organism ... a corporation or a society as a whole'. To put this in less abstract terms, think about society as, in **Maturana and Varela's** evocative description, 'living machines' (or, if it makes it easier, something like the *internet*).

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: **Luhmann's ideas about autopoietic networks link into modernist theories of stratification.**

We can clarify these ideas through the following example.

Every Sociology A2 class in England is structured by a range of *exterior* factors – some *formal* and *direct* (the Specification, for example), others *informal* and *indirect* – your personal reasons for being in class perhaps.

On a *systems level* the behaviour is much the same. Each class is a *network* contributing to the continued functioning of the educational system without the *conscious* efforts of the people involved. In other words, when you arrive for your sociology class you don't think, 'How does this behaviour help to reproduce social relationships at the structural level of society?' And even if you did you'd have no way of knowing exactly what behaviour is required to 'reproduce the education system'.

Structure, therefore, is imposed (from *outside*) and reproduced *within* (the class), which effectively means structure is the most significant variable involved in understanding human behaviour, since, without the initial sense of structure, a social network could not form.

This type of analysis provides a bridge between *modernist* and *postmodernist* social theory – the former in terms of, to paraphrase **Vandenbergh** (1998), systems theory being an attempt to 'explain everything' about the construction of the social world (a *metanarrative*, in other words), and the latter in terms of the conclusion that the social world 'is like a ship adrift from its moorings and without the possibility of a captain on board'. In other words, for postmodernists social life can be understood only through *descriptions* of social encounters; the world is too large, diverse and fragmented to be understood as some sort of coherent, unified system in the way it's generally understood by modernist sociology.

Postmodern

Postmodern perspectives, therefore, focus on the concept of:

Narrative as a way of conceptualising the

different ways people have of describing their situation. These 'stories' relate to both sociologists and non-sociologists alike – while sociological stories are of a different order they are, from this position, no more and no less 'true'. Narratives alone, however, don't adequately explain how social life hangs together. For this we need the concept of:

Discourse, something that refers, according to writers like **Foucault** (1972), to a system of ideas, organised in terms of a specific vocabulary. Both sociology and psychology, for example, are social science *discourses* (which is itself a further discourse). A discourse, therefore, involves a set of related narratives that both define something and, consequently, shape the way we interpret and understand its meaning. The same thing can, of course, be the subject of a number of different discourses – homosexuality, for example, may be the subject of different discourses depending on how you view this behaviour.



The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one discourse on human sexuality (for example, think about what some people class as 'normal' or 'abnormal' sexuality).

Fiske (1987) notes how the meaning of something both depends on the discourse that surrounds it and 'serves the interests of' the social group from which it arises. The term 'queer', for example, has a different meaning for gay men than it does for the British National Party.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

We can find examples of discourse and narrative right across the Specification – from politics (conservative and socialist discourses), through religion (such as Christianity and Islam), to education (selective or comprehensive schooling).

If discourses are part of everyday life, surrounding and shaping our perception of both people and the world, it follows that all knowledge must be *subjective* (or ideological, if you prefer), which has important ramifications for how sociologists can study the world, since it seems to negate the concept of:

Truth: We suggested earlier that postmodernists consider all forms of knowledge to be *relative*; one form can never be objectively proven to be superior to another form. This characterisation is, however, true(?) only up to a point. Questions of truth are *not wholly* relative; rather, they are *partially* relative – a nice distinction, perhaps, but one that has considerable relevance for sociology since it suggests something may be ‘true in principle’, but not universally true for all time. In other words, the concept of truth is:

Context-bound: Something may be true (or false) within a given set of specified parameters and under certain conditions. Thus, ‘truth’ itself is *not* a relative concept; the *contexts* within which truths can be established are, however, relative in time and space. If this is a little unclear, an example should clarify it.

Example

It is true that I have the status ‘husband’; however, the validity (or truth) of this

statement is *context-bound* in the sense that it depends on how the concept of ‘husband’ is defined. For example, if we define it as ‘a man who is married to a woman’, then I am a husband. If, however, ‘husband’ is defined as ‘a man married to a lamp post’, then I am *not* a husband. In this particular context, of course, we would also raise questions about how things like ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘lamp post’ were defined (but that only goes to show how complicated things can get).



Weeding the path

In terms of *social theory*, the idea of truth being context-bound has implications for sociology, science and, perhaps, the question of whether or not sociology is scientific. If questions of truth are necessarily bound up with both narratives and discourses, it follows that we are effectively defining them from a particular, partial and subjective viewpoint – which raises the question of how it is possible to generate reliable and valid knowledge, not just about the *social* world, but about the *natural* world as well.

Characteristics

To complete this section we can draw on **Rosenau’s** (1991) ideas about the general characteristics of postmodernity and their implications for social science:

- **Objectivity:** All knowledge is *inherently subjective* in terms of the assumptions made about how it is possible to study and understand the world (both natural and social). This follows, for postmodernists, because knowledge is created and validated within the context of specific discourses; thus, for natural scientists knowledge is validated by a belief in *empirical* principles (such as the existence

of facts, causality, and so forth). If we buy into a natural scientific discourse we *must* accept its ability to produce reliable and valid knowledge; if we *reject* that discourse we also, of course, reject its assumptions about reliability and validity.

- **Transgression:** Postmodernists raise important questions about *how* we can study the social world. In particular, they question the idea that knowledge can be neatly compartmentalised (in terms of categories like ‘science’ and ‘non-science’ or ‘sociology’ and ‘physics’). They question, therefore, the idea of *rigid* (modernist) *boundaries* in all areas of social life (from the distinction between ‘men and women’ to that between ‘truth and falsity’).
- **Diversity:** Knowledge is always tentative, partial and incomplete; what we believe we know is always open to challenge and, in this respect, consists of ‘competing stories’ that are evaluated in terms of prevailing cultural orthodoxies. There is not – and can never be – a universal truth.

Finally, **Hudgins and Richards** (2000) summarise quite neatly the different perspectives we’ve examined in this section when they note: ‘Postmodernism . . . may be seen as a completely new social science paradigm and a complete overthrow of modernism, or as the most recent stage of modernism itself. It may be seen as a force undermining social order leading to chaos and anarchy, or as the freedom from the repressive systems of thought of the past. Some fear the radical relativism of postmodernism, and some see it as the promise of a new and better society . . . One thing is certain, however, we are moving

toward a new way of understanding the social world . . . ’

Moving on

In this section we’ve looked at the ideas of modernity and postmodernity and how they relate, in very broad terms, to different forms of sociological theorising. In so doing we’ve raised questions about the methodological concepts of reliability and validity along the way, and in the next section we’re going to focus on this area by examining questions about the nature of ‘science’ and the status of sociological knowledge.

2. The nature of ‘science’ and the extent to which sociology may be regarded as scientific

In the previous section we raised some methodological questions relating to the production of knowledge about the social world which, in this section, we can develop in the context of how we define ‘science’ and the question of whether or not sociology can be classified as ‘scientific’ in both its approach and the knowledge it produces. Initially, however, we can note a couple of reasons for wanting to explore these ideas, both related to the concept of *status*:

- **Knowledge status:** Scientific knowledge is generally considered, in modern societies, to be the most reliable, valid and (perhaps) superior form of knowledge it’s possible to generate. In short, we associate (rightly or wrongly) scientific knowledge with *truth* – which is probably reason enough to think about this particular assumption in more detail.
- **Subject status:** If scientific knowledge is

WARM-UP: WHAT IS SCIENCE?

'Science' is a familiar idea in our society and you should, therefore, have a reasonable idea about the concept and be able to visualise various characteristics (and, by extension, the characteristics of non-science) when you hear the word itself.

In small groups, use the following table to identify and categorise your thoughts about science. Once you've exhausted all possibilities, as a class decide what constitutes science and non-science (and, of course, why).

Science is:	Science is not:
Factual Physics	Opinion Theatre studies

generally considered to be a *superior* form of knowledge, it's hardly surprising that sociologists would like a piece of the action – like anyone else, sociologists want their ideas to be taken seriously and one way for this to happen is if sociological knowledge has a similar status to natural scientific knowledge.



Preparing the ground: The nature of science

When we think about the concept of science, two initial ideas need to be clear:

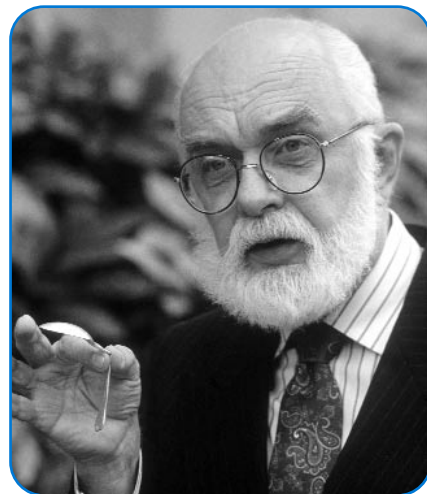
Knowledge: 'Science' is *not* a 'body of knowledge' – it isn't, for example, the preserve of particular subject areas (such as chemistry or physics). Rather, *science* is a way of producing a particular *kind* of knowledge. As **Popper** (1934) classically puts it: 'Science is ... a method of

approaching and studying phenomena. It involves identifying a problem to study, collecting information about it and eventually offering an explanation for it. All this is done as systematically as possible.'

In this respect, therefore, we can think about science as a:

Methodology – a way of producing *reliable* and *valid* knowledge. Scientific knowledge has, in this respect, been *tested* against available evidence and not been *disproven*, something that, at the very least, gives such knowledge greater *plausibility* than non-scientific knowledge – ideas that are consolidated around the ability to make:

Predictive statements based on scientific knowledge: Predictive ability means the scientist is in a position to say with *complete certainty* that something *will* happen in the



'Science is best defined as a careful, disciplined, logical search for knowledge about any and all aspects of the universe, obtained by examination of the best available evidence and always subject to correction and improvement upon the discovery of better evidence. What's left is magic, and it doesn't work'
James Randi (1993), magician

future – perhaps the most powerful form of knowledge statement we can make.



Weeding the path

Although the power of science is bound up with its ability to make predictive statements, **Carpi** (2003) identifies a common misconception about science (that it somehow defines ‘truth’): ‘Science does not define truth; rather, it defines a way of thought. It is a process in which experiments are used to answer questions’ – an important distinction because scientific knowledge (despite the claims of some postmodernists) doesn’t claim to be ‘true’ in the sense that it can never be questioned.

Rather, it involves the idea that scientific knowledge, properly tested and evidenced, represents the *most plausible* explanation we currently have for something and it retains this status only until some other scientist produces a *more plausible* explanation.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion/Power and politics: We can note that different definitions of ‘truth’ may apply in different contexts. For example, in terms of religion people may accept the truth of something (such as the existence of God) on the basis of *faith* (an unquestioning – and untestable – belief). Alternatively, *politicians* often ask their followers to accept the truth of something ‘on *trust*’ – which, unlike science, once again reflects an *unquestioning attitude to truth*.

If science is a methodology, it follows it must involve a set of *rules* applied by the scientist in the research process, and these, for our purpose, fall into two categories (*procedures* and *ethos*).

Procedures

Scientists must follow an agreed set of *methodological procedures* governing how data can be collected and analysed. One of the most influential examples here comes from **Popper’s** (1934) notion of a:

Hypothetico-deductive model, involving a number of phases, starting with:

Phenomena: Scientists choose – and think about – ‘a problem’ requiring explanation. They then:

Generate ideas about how to study ‘the problem’. This involves observations, both personal and of any work that may previously have been done in the area of interest. This eventually leads to the formation of a:

Testable hypothesis: To clarify ‘the problem’, a hypothesis is stated that must be capable of being tested through the collection and analysis of evidence. In **Popper’s** formulation, a hypothesis must be *capable* of being disproven through:

Systematic observation: Hypothesis testing involves collecting data in a reliable way. In the natural sciences, for example, *experimentation* is widely used because the scientist can control the conditions under which data are generated and, in theory at least, maintain an objective position that avoids personal interference in the data-collection process. After collection, data are:

Systematically analysed – the data have to be objectively interpreted so that:

Conclusions can be drawn from them. On the basis of the evidence, the hypothesis is *either*:

- **Refuted** (shown to be false) – in which case the scientist might develop a new testable hypothesis – or
- **Confirmed** – shown to be ‘not false’, an important distinction because **Popper**

argues scientific knowledge can never be conclusively shown to be 'true'. A 'confirmed hypothesis' then becomes part of a:

- **Theory** – an explanatory statement (usually) consisting of a series of linked, confirmed hypotheses that allow the scientist to make *predictive statements* about the behaviour initially observed.

Ethos

Ethos refers to rules governing the general conditions 'science' must satisfy if it is to both attain and maintain scientific status. In other words, the process of 'doing science' is located in a *community* that specifies:

- **standards** for the overall conduct of scientists and scientific forms of research, and
- **policies** for scientific practice, to ensure rules of procedure, such as the ones we've just noted, are obeyed.

Merton (1942) identified four areas of *research ethics* that, in combination, make up what he termed a:

Scientific ethos – a set of *normative guidelines* related to the practice of science:

- **Universalism:** The scientific community must evaluate knowledge only on the basis of objective, universally agreed criteria. Personal values – either those of the scientific community or of society as a whole – play no part in the evaluation process and criticism of a scientist's work should focus on refuting ('falsifying') their conclusions, identifying weaknesses in the research process, and so forth. In technical terms, scientists must avoid what **Labossiere** (1995) calls the:

Ad hominem fallacy – a situation in which an argument is rejected '... on the basis of some irrelevant fact about the author of or the person presenting the claim or argument' (whether this rejection is based on personal factors – their character, for example – or social factors such as gender, nationality, class, age and the like).

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: **Etzkowitz et al.** (2000) argue that, despite this ethos of universalism, female scientists frequently find their work and careers hampered by the 'hidden barriers, subtle exclusions and unwritten rules of the scientific workplace'.

- **Communality:** Scientific knowledge is 'public knowledge' shared, initially, within the scientific community for a number of reasons:
 - **Progression:** Scientists must be able to build on the work done by other scientists. This not only saves time and effort (scientists are not continually 'reinventing the wheel'), but also encourages the 'leaps of faith' (where one scientist, for example, is inspired to develop new ideas by understanding the work of other scientists) through which scientific understanding advances on a *cumulative* basis.
 - **Evaluation:** If scientific knowledge cannot be accepted 'on trust', it follows that scientists must make their work, including details of research methodology, available for peer review and criticism.
 - **Replication:** An important aspect of

scholarly criticism is the ability to repeat ('replicate') a piece of research to see whether the same results are attained. Such replication is normally done by other scientists who, therefore, require detailed knowledge of the original research. In recent times one of the most famous examples of 'peer review' in the natural sciences is **Fleischmann and Pons'** (1989) claim to have created energy through a process called 'cold fusion' – subsequent attempts by other scientists to repeat the experiment failed to confirm **Fleischmann and Pons'** findings.

- **Disinterestedness** has two basic meanings here:
 - **Institutional:** The main responsibility of the scientist is the pursuit of knowledge. This is not to say scientists should not be recognised for their

achievements (or rewarded for their efforts), but they should not have a stake in the 'success' of their research since this risks introducing personal bias into the research process.

- **Detachment:** The use to which research is put is not the responsibility of the scientist who produced it. Scientists, in other words, cannot be held accountable for how others (such as politicians) use their research.
- **Organised scepticism:** One of the guiding principles of science is that nothing is beyond criticism, a significant idea for two main reasons:
 - **Critical reflection:** The scientific community must continually evaluate knowledge (rather than simply taking it for granted) since this 'process of questioning' contributes to the development of human understanding.



Growing it yourself: Functional science

The scientific ethos is rooted in **Merton's** Functionalist outlook on social behaviour – an ethos develops and is maintained because it's in the interests of both scientists and non-scientists to ensure its normative principles and procedures are obeyed.

In this respect, we could also note how such an ethos reflects **Luhmann's** ideas about autopoiesis – the scientific community resembles a self-reproducing organisation that exists independently of its individual members.

As a class, identify as many *functions* (both personal and organisational) as possible of a scientific ethos (we've given you some ideas to start you off).

For scientists	For society
Preserves the personal and institutional credibility of science and scientists	Trust – we know research has been checked and rechecked

- **Inherency:** Knowledge is never ‘inherently true’ (an article of faith). This ‘sceptical attitude’ represented, for **Merton**, the main way scientific knowledge differed from other forms of knowledge (such as religious faith); the former is ‘true’ only because it has not, *as yet*, been disproved. The latter, however, is considered by its adherents to be *self-evidently true* (it cannot be refuted).

The idea of a scientific ethos, to which all scientists – by choice, peer pressure or institutional imperative – are forced to subscribe, enables us to understand the way scientific research is both organised and validated according to a set of institutionalised norms and values concerning what does and does not constitute science.



Weeding the path

Prelli (1989) notes that four types of ‘oppositional counter norms’ have been suggested to set against **Merton’s** moral norms:

- **Particularism**, whereby the personal status, ability and experience of a scientist leads others to uncritically accept their arguments and findings.
- **Solitariness:** Scientists are increasingly claiming ‘property rights’ to the commercial exploitation of their work, thereby preventing scientific scrutiny under the guise of ‘commercial confidentiality’.
- **Interestedness:** With commercial employment and exploitation scientists

are under increasing pressure to ensure their work ‘produces the desired results’.

- **Organised dogmatism** involving scientists fervently defending their research and findings against external criticism, while ‘doubting the findings of others’.



Digging deeper: The nature of science

Prelli’s identification of ‘oppositional norms’ suggests we need to look more critically at both the theory and practice of science, not only in terms of a *scientific ethos* but also in terms of the logic and procedures of a scientific methodology (such as the hypothetico-deductive model proposed by **Popper**).

In thinking about the conduct of science, therefore, we can begin by noting **Kaplan’s** (1964) distinction between two types of logic:

- **Logics-in-use:** **Solomon** (2000) describes this as ‘what people actually do’ – and how they go about doing it – when they carry out research.
- **Reconstructed logics** refer to how a piece of research is presented to the world, for both peer review within the scientific community and public consumption.

Ideally, the two logics should be the same since the scientist is simply recording and presenting a description of their research, but research ‘in the real world’ is rarely, if ever, the smooth, uncluttered process described by **Popper’s** (idealised) research procedure.



Weeding the path

Although these two ideas express possible differences between what scientists ‘say they do’ (a *reconstructed logic* that presents a polished narrative for peer and public consumption) and what they ‘actually do’ (*logic-in-use*), this is not to say scientists deliberately cheat or falsify their procedures and results. As **Medawar** (1963) argues, scientific papers describing the research process are ‘fraudulent’ only in the sense that they ‘... give a totally misleading narrative of the processes of thought that go into the making of scientific discoveries’.

However, it does suggest that if reconstructions are the norm, it is difficult for scientific research to be reliably and validly *replicated* since what is being retested is a *narrative* that *describes* a research process, not the actual process itself – something **Kaplan** (1964) calls an ‘idealisation of scientific practice’ rather than an objective description of such practice. This distinction raises an important question for the sociology of science (and, by extension, the question of whether or not sociology can be considered scientific), namely the extent to which the ability of natural scientists to produce highly reliable and valid knowledge is based on a:

- **Scientific methodology** that guarantees the production of such knowledge or a:
- **Subject matter** that, because it does not have *consciousness*, allows the natural scientist to produce reliable and valid knowledge ‘regardless’ of the exact form of methodology used to generate it.

These questions are crucial to both an understanding of science and, by implication, the question of whether or not sociology can

be a science in the same way that physics, for example, is a science. If ‘scientific knowledge’ is the product of a *methodology*, it’s theoretically possible for social scientists to use a similar methodology to study human behaviour. If, however, such knowledge is a quality of the *subject matter* of natural science (inanimate objects rather than thinking subjects), it will be impossible to reliably and validly use such a methodology in the social sciences.

Systems

We can develop these ideas further by thinking about the difference between two types of system:

- **Closed systems** allow researchers to tightly control variables that potentially affect the behaviour being studied (as in a laboratory, for example). Such systems are ‘closed’ because they can be isolated from wider environments (the ‘outside world’).
- **Open systems** involve the opposite idea – they represent situations where the possible range of influences on behaviour cannot be completely controlled by the researcher. In the social world, ‘society’ is the ultimate *open system*, but open systems are also found in the natural world – in the study of global weather systems, for example – and this makes for an interesting observation.

For both types of system:

Laws of cause and effect operate, making it theoretically possible to predict how something will behave. However, the inability to fully control all possible variables in *open systems* makes *predictions* about observed behaviour difficult – if not impossible. In this respect:



Growing it yourself: Open and closed systems

Using the following table as a template, we can relate ideas about open and closed systems to research methods by identifying the advantages and disadvantages of studying people's behaviour in a laboratory as opposed to their natural environment (society).

Laboratory (closed system)		In society (open system)	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Control of variables	Unnatural environment	Natural environment	Difficult to control variables

Chaos theory provides an example of how open systems work and the problems they hold for scientific research methodology in that it argues that small variations in behaviour can produce very large differences in outcome, sometimes referred to as the:

Butterfly effect: Lorenz (1972) posed the question 'Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?' to demonstrate the idea of *random variation* – something illustrated quite neatly in the film *Jurassic Park*, where the 'chaos mathematician' Ian Malcolm argues that the plan to cage dinosaurs in a *closed system* (an isolated theme park) is doomed to failure because 'nature always finds a way'. In other words, although open systems are relatively stable and in some measure predictable, there are times when minute changes lead to random (or unpredictable) outcomes – and since we have no way of knowing what change will produce what outcome, the ability to predict behaviour in open systems with any certainty is impossible.



Weeding the path

Both *chaos theory* and the nature of *open systems* suggest two things:

- **Science** is a methodology sensitive to the subject matter it is designed to study.
- **Societies** – and the behaviour of people within them – are open, chaotic systems that cannot necessarily be studied in the same way we study behaviour in closed systems.

In addition, thus far we've failed to question the idea of a 'single scientific methodology' (that proposed, for example, by **Popper**). However, we can correct this by suggesting there may be different ways of 'doing science' both *within* natural sciences such as chemistry and biology and *between* different areas of science (such as biology and sociology). **Feyerabend** (1975), for example, contributes a couple of interesting ideas here:

- **Complexity:** The natural world is a

complex space that cannot be easily contained within simple categories of thought; developments in *chaos theory* (and *quantum physics*), for example, call into question a ‘one size fits all’ methodology based around *falsification* (the hypothetico-deductive model). For **Feyerabend** this methodological straightjacket of a ‘single prescriptive scientific method’ was too restrictive and led to a:

- **Rigidity of thinking:** Natural scientists become locked into the need to defend ‘the scientific method’ against both internal and external attack and, by so doing, close themselves off to alternative arguments and methodologies.



Weeding the path

Feyerabend’s arguments are sometimes interpreted as an ‘attack on science’ (he has been accused of being ‘antiscience’ and the advocate of an ‘anything goes’ view of scientific methodology). However, **Feyerabend** can also be seen as contributing to a debate about the nature of science designed to *strengthen* science by making it more responsive to new ideas.

More recently, the question of objective forms of knowledge and practice has been attacked by postmodernists in two related ways.

Theoretical critiques

Theoretical critiques focus on the idea that science is simply another:

Discourse that explains something about the world and, as such, it competes against other discourses (religion, mysticism, magic, and so forth). Science has no special claim to

truth because, from this viewpoint, concepts like ‘truth’ are, as we’ve suggested, inherently subjective. The argument, for example, that ‘scientific explanations’ are *superior* to religious explanations (because scientific knowledge is based on objective testing and proof while religious knowledge is based on faith) is rejected by postmodernists because tests of ‘superiority’ are inherently based on *subjective criteria*; certain groups (such as scientists or priests), for example, have the *power* to define the criteria against which something is judged. In this way, therefore, science (like religion) represents a:

Metanarrative – just another grand narrative that seeks, by whatever means, to establish its *hegemony* over all other possible narratives. Postmodernist theoretical critiques tend, in this respect, to focus around ideas like:

- **Objectivity:** Taking a lead from **Polyani’s** (1958) observation that ‘all observation is theory-dependent’ (to understand what we are seeing we must, by definition, already know what it is – we must have already formulated a *theory* that describes what we’re seeing *before* we see it), postmodernists have argued that the concept of ‘objectivity’ (the ability to observe something dispassionately without influencing the behaviour being observed) is not possible.
- **Midwifery:** Natural science argues that ‘reality’ (and by extension *knowledge*) is something that ‘exists to be discovered’ (*heurism*). The scientist, therefore, is like a midwife – someone charged with the delivery of knowledge rather than its actual creation (which is how scientists are able to claim objectivity). For postmodernists this involves what

Polyani (1967) termed '*tacit knowledge*', a fundamental conviction about the nature of things in the natural world – in this case, the *subjective belief* (one based on the cultural values of the scientist) that reality and knowledge take the form they claim.



Weeding the path

Craig (2005) notes: 'Science bases its pursuit of and claim to truth on *objective* enquiry. Denials of the possibility of objectivity therefore attack science 'at its root' and, as you might expect, scientists have responded to the criticisms put forward by postmodernists in a variety of ways:

- **Reality:** The natural world really is different to the social world and the two should not be confused. *Causal relationships* between inanimate objects are *real* – they occur whatever the political and ideological outlook of the observer. Partly this is the result of the *heuristic* nature of the natural world (things exist and can be discovered), but it is also due to the skill and knowledge of the scientist. **Feyerabend** (1992) – although, as we've suggested, sometimes seen as a critic of modern science – makes a significant supporting point when he notes: 'Movements that view quantum mechanics as a turning point in thought – and that includes fly-by-night mystics, prophets of a New Age, and relativists of all sorts – get aroused by the cultural component and forget predictions and technology'.
- **Misinformation:** Critics of postmodernism, such as **Sokal** (1994), have argued that a great deal of

postmodern writing on science is generally misinformed, lacking in depth and misunderstands what scientists attempt to do. An example here is the concept of:

- **Truth** – scientists, according to **Sokal**, are well aware that any claim to 'truth' must, as **Popper** (1934) argues, '... remain tentative for ever'.

Practical critiques

Practical critiques, meanwhile, focus on the uses to which scientific knowledge is put, an idea bound up in the concept of:

Progress: Postmodernists have been critical of the association between scientific knowledge and 'progress' – the idea that science has practical uses in terms of *improving* our lives. **Campbell** (1996) captures the general flavour of this criticism when he notes: 'Science is viewed as the vanguard of European exploitation, a discipline run amok, the instigators of nuclear and other weapons systems, the handmaiden of big business and as the defilers of nature.'

The charge here, in effect, is that science is not necessarily the 'dispassionate, objective 'search for truth' that scientists would like us to believe, and **Malik** (1998) articulates this general situation quite neatly: 'Whereas once science stood as a metaphor for human advancement, today it stands more as a metaphor for human debasement. That is why with every technological advance – from cloning to genetically modified food – there is a tendency for people to stress the *problems* it may cause rather than the promise that it holds. *Fear of science* has become the vehicle through which wider social insecurities are given vent.'

Discussion point: What have scientists ever done for us?

Whether or not you see this type of criticism as valid, it's clear that people no longer (if indeed they ever did) view science and scientists as necessarily being beneficial bringers of progress.

To explore this idea as a class, identify some positive and negative aspects of science and scientific knowledge.

Use these ideas to discuss the extent to which you see science as a broadly beneficial or broadly harmful enterprise.

Further questions develop, with a practical focus, from the idea of **Prelli's** (1989) 'oppositional norms' which we noted earlier, and the extent to which scientists actually conform to a 'community of values' represented by a *scientific ethos*. We could, for example, note the problem of:

Scientific fraud: Although both **Martin** (1992) and **Jones** (2002), among others, have documented examples of scientific fraud, the fact that it is routinely detected tells us that either the policing of science is relatively successful or, as with other forms of deception, 'revealed deviance' is merely the tip of a very large iceberg. Although we can't know with any certainty the extent of fraud within various branches of science, **Martinson et al.** (2005) discovered 33% of 3200 US scientists 'confessed to various kinds of misconduct – such as claiming credit for someone else's work, or changing results because of pressure from a study's sponsor'. They suggest, however, that the real area of concern is the '... wider range of questionable research practices', such as:

Misrepresentations: **Martin** (1992) suggests: 'In the routine practice of scientific research, there are many types of misrepresentation and bias which could be considered dubious. However, only a few narrowly defined behaviours are singled out

and castigated as scientific fraud.' This characterisation has two major consequences:

- **Routinisation:** A variety of 'dubious practices', **Martin** (1992) suggests, permeate the research process. These 'routine deviations' are technically misrepresentations but are rarely, if ever, punished. Included in this general category are behaviours such as:
 - **Reconstructed logics** – as we've seen, publications detailing a research process may bear only a passing resemblance to the *actual* process.
 - **Referencing:** A failure to adequately reference all sources. **Simkin** and **Roychowdhury** (2002) found 80% of citations in research papers were simply copied – spelling mistakes included – from other reference lists.
 - **Intellectual exploitation:** Making use of the work of others without giving them the credit/recognition they deserve.
 - **Unrealistic assessments** of the research's importance (in order to achieve higher levels of funding).
- **Function:** **Martin** argues: 'A narrow

definition of scientific fraud is convenient to the groups in society – scientific elites and powerful government and corporate interests – that have the dominant influence on priorities in science.’ He notes that one function of ‘the denunciation of fraud’ is that it ‘helps to paint the rest of scientific behaviour as blameless’.



Preparing the ground: Is sociology scientific?

When we start to consider the question of whether sociology can – or cannot – be considered scientific, an initial problem we face is one of:

Definition: The extent to which anything can be considered scientific depends on how science is defined; however, for the sake of argument, we can think of science in the way we’ve outlined it at the start of this section and focus our efforts on the question of the extent to which sociology is scientific in the way something like physics is considered scientific. We can do this by examining a number of theoretical and practical ideas surrounding the theory and practice of science and the extent to which sociology meets these scientific criteria.

Principles

We can, therefore, examine the general methodological principles of science, starting with the idea that it is:

Theoretical: This idea works on two levels. First, science, as we’ve suggested, operates on the principle of testable hypotheses. Second, it represents a body of reliable and valid theoretical knowledge that can be used to inform our judgements about – and interpretations of – future behaviour.

In the natural sciences both these levels are attainable; within sociology, however, although the first is achievable, the second is more questionable (*‘problematic’*).



Weeding the path

Predicting individual behaviour is, for reasons we’ll explore in a moment, either methodologically unattainable (the social world does not conform to *simple* cause-and-effect relationships, for example) or unattainable given our present levels of technology (the development of computerised mathematical modelling, for example, may change this). We need to remember, however, that not all forms of behaviour in the natural world are ‘individually predictable’ – weather systems being a case in point (scientists have never been able to *precisely predict* weather patterns).

At the level of social groups it’s possible, in some ways, to make theoretical sociological statements that have ‘law-like’ qualities. **Parsons’** concept of *functional imperative* might be a case in point and, on a more general level, we could note the fact that all social groups involve roles, socialisation, values, beliefs and norms (although we can’t, unlike with natural science, necessarily predict with any certainty their precise content).

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Durkheim’s analysis and explanation for different types of suicide could fit this category of theoretical statements with law-like qualities.

Empiricism involves specifying what constitutes an acceptable form of data. In a

simple sense, empirical data is information collected ‘through the use of our senses’ (sight, touch, smell, hearing, taste) – in other words, it involves generating data through our *observations* and *experiences*, and although ‘empirical’ is often confused with the idea that something is ‘factual’ or ‘scientific’, this is not necessarily the case. For example, your *description* of your reasons for doing something (in an interview or questionnaire, for example) represents *empirical data* – it doesn’t have to be true (you could be making it up) and it is not scientific because it hasn’t been verified, which means an important quality of science is:

Testing: This is an important quality, according to **Popper**, because it opens up the possibility of:

Falsification: Although a hypothesis may be sufficiently robust to resist all (past and current) attempts to disprove it, scientific theories *always* contain the *possibility* of falsification through testing. This ‘test of testability’, as it were, is frequently cited as a crucial element in the distinction between scientific and non-scientific knowledge.



Weeding the path

In terms of something like **Popper’s** hypothetico-deductive model, sociology can be considered, at best, as being:

- **Pre-theoretical:** Although it is capable of developing testable hypotheses, it hasn’t made the necessary leap to the development of a body of theoretical knowledge that can be used as the basis for predictions (in the way that natural sciences like physics and chemistry have made such a leap). Sociological theories,

in this respect, are sometimes criticised for being ideological statements whose truth or falsity is *assumed* rather than tested. However, in relation to the idea of:

- **Empiricism,** not all sociologists subscribe to empirical testing as the basis for the generation of reliable and valid knowledge, for a couple of reasons. First, as we’ve suggested, some have questioned the definition of science employed in the natural sciences as an *ideological imposition*, whereby a powerful interest group (natural scientists) imposes its definition of science on other, competing groups to its own advantage. Second, some forms of sociology (such as **Luhmann’s** systems theory) focus on large-scale group behaviour that can only be theorised, not empirically tested.

This objection is also significant because in the natural world non-empirical testing (and falsification) is not unknown – **Youngson** (1998) argues that *quantum physics* cannot be studied using **Popper’s** model of science (for complicated reasons we don’t need to concern ourselves with here).



The potting shed

From any area of the Specification, identify and briefly explain one tested sociological hypothesis with which you are familiar.

Accumulation expresses the idea that a scientific body of knowledge is built up from previous (tested) knowledge. In one general respect sociology satisfies this criterion since sociologists have accumulated a stock of

knowledge that informs the work of other sociologists. In another respect, the idea of cumulative knowledge is open to question if it is taken to mean a:

Linear progression – one confirmed theory forming the basis for other theories, and so forth. As **Kuhn** (1962) suggests (albeit in a slightly different context), the variety of sociological perspectives and interpretations used to explain much the same sort of thing (human social behaviour) suggests there is no great sense of ‘cumulative unity’ within sociology.

Objectivity: As we’ve noted earlier, this idea works on two basic levels of meaning:

- **Personal:** On this level we need to consider the extent to which individual scientists (natural or social) can remain detached from whatever they’re studying. In this respect, questions of *personal bias*, *influence* and, in some cases, *fraud* enter the equation and, while it’s probably easier to maintain an emotional detachment from bacteria in a Petri dish than it is from, say, a starving child,



Say hello to my little friends . . .

distressed mother or suicidal teenager, there’s no real evidence to suggest sociologists are any more – or any less – personally biased in their work than physicists (indeed, as we’ve seen, with the latter the ‘pressure from sponsors’ to produce desired results may put more temptation in the way of natural scientists).

- **Institutional** objectivity, meanwhile, is a slightly different question. Here we’re concerned with the status of knowledge itself and the question of whether it is possible to collect *objective* knowledge about human behaviour. This idea goes to the heart of the distinction between the inanimate subject matter of natural science (which simply *reacts* to stimulation) and the animate (self-conscious) subject matter of sociology. The question here is whether it’s possible to study human behaviour without changing that behaviour. In addition, institutional objectivity needs to consider whether it is possible – or for some sociologists desirable – to keep values and beliefs separate from the things being researched.

Ethics: Sociologists, like their natural science counterparts, produce work within a community that both regulates and scrutinises their work.



Digging deeper: Is sociology scientific?

In this final part, we can address the second of the ideas noted above – the *practical principles* involved in ‘doing science’ – and we can begin by suggesting that, whatever the *theoretical* claims to scientific status

Discussion point: Big Brother is watching?

BIG BROTHER

A simple way to grasp the idea of self-awareness (and its relationship to sociological research) is in terms of the *Big Brother* TV show where contestants are fully observed by cameras 24/7.

- How might the knowledge of being observed by a hidden TV audience affect the contestants' behaviour?
- How might behaviour be affected by the lure of possible 'celebrity status' if they 'perform well' in the show?

A criticism which *Big Brother* contestants frequently make about each other is that they are not 'being themselves' and are, in consequence, somehow 'false' (people are 'playing to the cameras').

To what extent do you think social interaction involves 'giving a performance' (and how might this relate to the question of whether it's possible for sociology to be scientific)?

advanced by sociologists, it would be naive to pretend sociological data can match the general precision, reliability and validity of everyday examples of natural scientific research. It is impossible, it could be argued, for sociology to match the consistency of natural science in terms of predicting behaviour at the individual level, for two related reasons:

Self-awareness: People have a consciousness that gives them the ability to both act and react; we can both respond to social stimulation *and* initiate social action.

Complexity: People are not just thinking, reasoning, self-aware beings (one layer of complexity), they are also part of a complex web of social interactions and meanings – a further layer of complexity. The constant, dynamic interplay between these two levels makes it difficult for sociologists to control the conditions under which research takes place. As **How** (2005) puts it: 'The

Sociologist has to undertake two acts of interpretation: one involves the concepts and ideas that she or he has about the subject matter, the other involves the concepts and ideas the people involved in the social situation being investigated have about themselves.'

We could also add that in many forms of research (from interviews to overt participant observation) a third layer of complexity is added by the fact that research subjects may also interpret the presence and behaviour of sociologists in ways that affect the 'naturalness' of the behaviour being observed.



Weeding the path

This is not a situation unique to sociology. Some areas of natural science involve complex systems that make precise levels of predication impossible – think, for example, about the behaviour of viruses (such as the

common cold) that constantly *mutate*. It is not possible to predict accurately who will catch a cold (although it is possible to predict the *conditions* under which you are likely to catch a cold).

Although ideas about consciousness and complexity are significant, they are not the whole story. An important area of doubt surrounding the ‘scientific status’ of sociology relates to the nature of the subject itself and a key concept here is:

Diversity

Although it’s clear that, within the natural sciences, there are demarcation lines between different categories of science – physics and chemistry, for example, are different disciplines – there is also a sense that they are in some way generally *unified* around a common methodology. Within sociology, divisions are also apparent, but when **Dawe** (1970) refers to the idea of ‘... two sociologies; a sociology of the social system and a sociology of social action’, this is something more than a simple divergence of focus or interest, since the rider to **Dawe’s** ‘two sociologies’ is that ‘at every level, they are in conflict’.

Notwithstanding something like **Giddens’** (1991) attempt to forge a sense of theoretical unity between structural and action approaches through *structuration theory*, the ‘two sociologies’ occupy different positions in relation to the extent to which ‘sociology in practice’ can lay claim to scientific status.

Interactionist sociologies suggest the concept of science can be redefined in relation to understanding the behaviour of human subjects. There is, for example, little or no interest in the type of elaborate and wide-ranging, theory-building characteristic

of the natural sciences for the deceptively simple reason that action theorists generally recognise that the attempt to replicate the success of natural science in the context of social science is unlikely to succeed. Rather, the ‘redefinition of science’ is carried out through the idea that a different order of phenomena (*subjects* who are capable of reflection and action as opposed to *objects* that are incapable of either) requires a different form of methodology – one that concentrates on *descriptive explanation* rather than hypothesis testing and theory building.

Structuralist sociologies, meanwhile, suggest sociology can aspire to a form of scientific status, but only at the expense of eliminating human consciousness from the equation. In this respect, if we remove the source of the problem (the subject/object distinction noted above) we can examine structural phenomena (large-group behaviours, for example) *as if* they were objects without consciousness. This idea goes back to **Durkheim’s** (1895) concept of:

Social facts involving the claim that certain classes of phenomena, such as language, are essentially *external* to the individual; they exist *prior* to the individual and will continue *after* the individual. Social facts, therefore, exist outside individual consciousness – people internalise these facts as and when necessary, but their status nevertheless remains one of separation from individual behaviour. To communicate verbally, for example, we have to learn a ‘common language’ that, in effect, acts as a constraint on behaviour. For **Durkheim**, therefore, *social facts* could be studied ‘as things’ – a belief that, in some respects taken to its logical conclusion by writers such as **Luhmann**, revolves around the concept of:

Objectification: This relates to the idea

that sociologists should concentrate their efforts on the behaviour of social groups and, by extension, how the necessity of group living creates objective, observable phenomena. By adopting this view, sociology can come closer to matching the *practical utility* of the natural sciences, albeit at the expense of reducing the complexities of individual human behaviours to an interesting – but relatively inconsequential – status.

If we throw postmodernism into the mix, the situation becomes further complicated, since this general way of seeing the world doesn't recognise the 'special status' afforded to science. From this position it is a matter of supreme indifference as to whether sociology is 'scientific' since the question could be asked – with equal validity and consequence – to what extent is sociology a religion, a sport or a lifestyle choice (or, indeed, to what extent is science a sociology)? Such questions matter, postmodernists argue, only in the context of:

Status discourses, and since these are inherently subjective, such an 'evaluation of worth' can be played out only in the context of power struggles between different status groups.

Normal science

In more conventional terms, perhaps, the inability of sociology to present a 'united theoretical front' is, for **Kuhn** (1962), a fundamental weakness – one that prevents it being considered in terms of:

Normal science, which he identifies as:

Paradigmatic: A scientific paradigm, according to **Ritzer** (2000), represents a consensual image, shared by all practitioners, of its subject matter. 'It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be

asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained.' For **Kuhn**, normal science involves a clearly defined, uncontested paradigmatic structure. Scientists are socialised into the paradigm and, as such, adopt the basic assumptions involved about how to theorise, test and establish scientific relationships. Disciplines such as physics, chemistry, mathematics and the like would be included in this characterisation of science. For **Kuhn** sociology is:

Pre-scientific because it hasn't, as yet, attained the features and status of normal science. Pre-scientific disciplines are characterised by:

- **Disorganisation** in terms of the different ways practitioners define and understand the discipline, with a range of diverse – frequently non-complementary – perspectives and activities.
- **Debates** over – and questioning of – fundamental principles.
- **Diversity**, in the sense of little or no agreement over basic methodological principles.



The potting shed

From any area of the Specification, identify and explain one example to support or reject the idea that sociology has a pre-scientific status.

Finally, we can return to the idea that debates about what constitutes 'science' revolve around questions of *definition* – are we, **Lee** (1992) argues, '... too easily seduced by a particular view of scientific knowledge – the so-called "positivist"

Discussion point: Reading sociology and science

The following table (adapted from Fuller, 1998) forms the basis of this individual essay-writing exercise.

Take *each* idea in Column A in turn and write a paragraph with the following format:

- Briefly state the idea and explain what it means from a sociological viewpoint.
- Add to this the *adjacent* idea in Column B by explaining ‘how scientists read’ the sociological explanation.
- Complete the paragraph by explaining how scientists have, according to Fuller, misrepresented sociological ideas about the nature of science.

A. When sociology says ...

Science is socially constructed

Sociology has its own aims and methods

Science is only one possible way of interpreting experience

Gravity is a concept scientists use to explain why we fall down, not up – there are other explanations

Scientists’ accounts of their activities are not necessarily the best explanation for those activities

B. Scientists read ...

Science is whatever enough people think it is

Sociology wilfully ignores the aims and methods of science

Science is merely an interpretation that distorts experience

Gravity exists only in our minds and, if we wanted, we could fall up, not down

Scientists’ accounts of their activities can be disregarded when explaining those activities

conception – which identifies science with certainty (Keat and Urry, 1975). To possess this certainty, it is said, knowledge must take the form of an agreed body of theory expressed as objective general laws; these laws in turn, must have been established through the detached observation of ‘facts’.

In other words, do the characteristics we’ve blithely assigned to the natural sciences (positivistic, objective, predictive and the like) owe more to the success of scientific interest groups and elites in projecting a particular view of ‘science’ and

‘the scientist’ on to Western societies than to any real description of natural science?

Moving on

In this section we’ve examined ideas about the nature of scientific methodology and drawn some tentative conclusions about the extent to which sociology can be considered a science. In doing this, we’ve raised further questions about the nature and status of sociological theory and method that we can examine further in the next section.

3. The relationship between theory and methods

This section explores in more detail the nature of the relationship between theory and methods by thinking about how they are linked through different types of sociological methodology. In this respect we need to note:

Theory is something we use all the time in everyday life. Whenever we *speculate* about why people do things (such as marry, commit criminal acts or vote for particular political parties) we are using theory to guide our explanations – and although the development of sociological theory is a bit more sophisticated than our everyday theories, the basic principle underpinning both is very similar.

To start with, we can think about two types of theory – *descriptive* and *causal*. The

former is usually designed to provide *qualitative* explanations while the latter seeks to establish (*quantitative*) cause-and-effect relationships.



Preparing the ground: Theory and method

When we think about the relationship between theory and methods we are actually thinking about the nature of the sociological research process – a common-sense description of which might involve a researcher thinking about what they want to study, coming up with a few speculative ideas (theory) and then testing them with whatever method seems most appropriate. This, however, obscures a more sophisticated set of ideas and processes – something we can begin to appreciate by thinking about the research process as being like a game; it

WARM-UP: THINKING THEORETICALLY

In small groups, choose an issue related to education – it can be as large (‘why do boys achieve less than girls in our educational system?’) or as small (‘why can’t I concentrate in class?’) as you like. Using the following activities as a guide:

- Brainstorm some possible explanations for your chosen issue.
- Choose one explanation and write either a research question or research hypothesis to guide your research.
- Choose the most appropriate method for your research.

Issue to explain:	
Possible explanations?	
Research question [descriptive research]?	
Research hypothesis [causal research]?	
What research method (and why) would you choose for this research?	

involves certain rules and procedures that need to be obeyed and it can be played on different levels: some play it for fun in their back garden (such as when you speculate about the reasons for someone's behaviour) and others play it professionally – something that involves moving away from the 'everyday' or common-sense understanding of 'theory' to develop a more sociological level of understanding.

Theory

In this respect, we can begin by noting that 'a theory' is a:

Model or **framework** consisting of tested and confirmed hypotheses that can be used to explain something. In this sense, therefore, rather than seeing 'theory' as a form of speculation about behaviour (something more correctly seen as a *hypothesis*), we should think of it as representing a body of tried-and-tested knowledge, from which we can make:

Generalisations about people's behaviour.

Thio (1991) notes that a theory represents 'a set of logically-related hypotheses that explains the relationship among various phenomena' and we can add a couple of ideas to this formulation. First, behaviour models are:

Tentative – there is always the possibility that they can be falsified or that some other theory will be developed that explains more than the original theory.

Second, the distinction between 'theory' and 'practice' used in everyday conversation is misleading since it confuses 'theory' with 'hypothesis'. If an explanation works 'in practice' it must also, by definition, work 'in theory'; the two ideas are part of the same, interrelated process.

At this point we can introduce 'methods'

into the equation since, as you will be aware, some theories achieve greater acceptance than others. This is because the strongest theories – those that have not, as yet, been falsified – have been:

Tested and supported by *evidence* collected using *research methods*.

In this respect, theory and methods are initially linked (at a basic level) by the fact that they have a:

Symbiotic relationship – the one, in other words, needs the other:

- **Theories without evidence** to support them provide no way of knowing which, if any, particular explanation is true (or at least not false), whereas:
- **Evidence without theory** means we would have no way of telling what, if anything, it was evidence of.

Guide

Theory, therefore, *guides* data collection, telling us *where* and *how* to look for evidence.

Methods, meanwhile, are the 'nuts and bolts' of research in the sense that evidence is used to refute or confirm a particular theory.

Sociologists, as you've discovered at AS level, have a wide range of methods at their disposal – something that reflects a diversity of different sociological interests and beliefs about how it is possible to study social behaviour. Some methods (such as questionnaires) lend themselves to large-scale, quantitative macroanalysis, whereas others (such as covert participant observation) are better adapted to small-scale, qualitative microanalysis.



Digging deeper: Theory and method

Just as we can identify different research

methods, we can also talk about different kinds of theory:

- **Low-level theories** involve explaining or describing a specific (low-level) aspect of social behaviour – why, for example, are some individuals more likely to commit crimes than others?
- **Mid-range theories** are broader in scope and focus on explaining or describing a general class of social behaviour (such as why girls achieve higher educational qualifications in the UK than boys).
- **High-level theories** are the broadest kind of theory and focus on the development of a general picture of society itself – when we talk about sociological perspectives, for example, we're generally referring to this type of theory.



The potting shed

From any area of the Specification, identify and briefly explain one example of each of the above types of theory.

The three types we've just delineated for the sake of conceptual clarity are, in the real world of sociological research, necessarily *interconnected*. The general picture of society held by the sociologist, for example, influences the type of mid-range (and possibly low-level) theories developed to explain social behaviour. In other words, high-level theories represent perspectives (or paradigms, if you prefer) that reflect fundamental beliefs about the nature of human society, how behaviour can be studied and explained, and so forth. As **Blunt** (1994) puts it: 'Researchers approach

inquiry from a particular philosophical stance or world view, which determines the purpose, design, methods used and the interpretation of results.'

Given the significance of high-level theories, therefore, we can examine how different perspectives involve different interpretations of both the nature of society and, most importantly for our purpose, the relationship between theory and method. In order to draw out this relationship, therefore, we need to organise our observations in some way – and the most obvious way to do this is to think in terms of the following categories.

Organising categories

Ontological: The most fundamental area of belief is to ask the question '*What do you believe exists?*' which translates here into beliefs about the nature of the social world (do we, for example, see it as socially constructed or biologically programmed? Do we take a systems or a non-systems approach? and so forth). How we answer these fundamental questions determines:

Epistemological beliefs relating to the kinds of:

Proof we will accept to justify our ontological beliefs. In the natural sciences, for example, *ontological beliefs* about the world (that it is governed by causal relationships that form the basis for the discovery of laws of physical behaviour) influence *epistemological beliefs* about how to go about the task of establishing these relationships (through experimentation, for example).

For the study of social behaviour the range of possible proofs may be greater, but the general principle holds. If, for example, you believe proof should be built around the

development of reliable data that can be replicated exactly, participant observation is unlikely to figure highly in your choice of research methods – which leads to a further aspect of belief:

Methodology is concerned with ideas focused on the *reliability* and *validity* of both knowledge and the methods used to generate it. Methodology, therefore, provides a link between *theory* and *method* because it specifies how to generate data to test a particular hypothesis or research question. The final area of belief, therefore, involves:

Research methods: Although there is no simple, hard-and-fast relationship between different types of sociological theory and different types of method, some methods are more closely aligned with some perspectives than with others, as we will see in a moment.

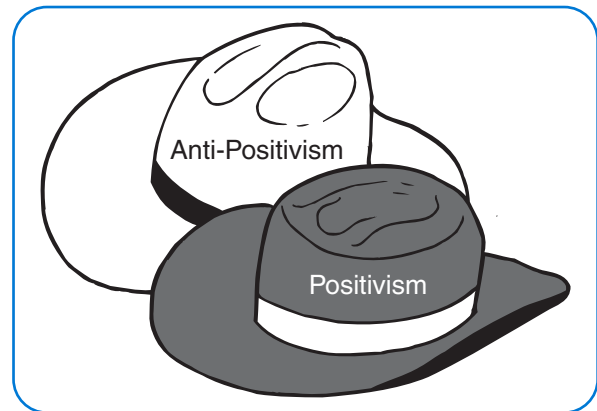
These ideas form the basic structure for an outline of different types of high-level sociological theory that broadly specify how it is both possible and/or desirable to study the social world. Conventionally, debates surrounding the different theoretical models we can apply to sociological research revolve around two ‘opposing’ positions:

- **Positivist** sociology, where the focus is on procedures and research methods that mirror those found in the natural sciences, and
- **Interpretivist** (sometimes called ‘**anti-positivist**’) sociology, where the focus is on a different set of procedures and methods ‘more applicable’ to the different nature of the sociological subject.



Weeding the path

Although convention dictates that we examine these two basic positions, we need to note two ideas. First, sociological theory is frequently presented as some sort of battleground between these two, absolutely opposed, positions. Second, where theory is represented in this oppositional way it’s easy to fall into the trap of seeing ‘positivists’ as ‘the Bad Guys’ and ‘anti-positivists’ as ‘the Good Guys’ (or vice versa, of course).



This type of *Disneyfication* of theory – where complex ideas are reduced to simple black-and-white oversimplifications – is something we want to avoid by both presenting a range of different positions here and, more importantly, stressing that our observations should not be misinterpreted as being definitive statements about ‘positivists’, ‘interpretivists’ or whoever. In this respect, what follows can be broadly characterised as a series of:

Ideal types where we emphasise a range of *ideal* features of a high-level theory (such as positivism) and hold them up as ‘perfect examples’ against which to measure the reality of a situation. In other words, although ‘positivist theory’ *ideally* involves certain ontological, epistemological and

methodological ideas, it doesn't necessarily follow that there are actually sociological researchers who can be clearly and unequivocally labelled 'positivists'.



Preparing the ground: Methodologies

The first 'ideal type' of sociological methodology we can outline is the classic one of:

Positivist principles

Positivist ontology, characterised in terms of two major ideas:

- **Laws** and law-like relationships: The social world is similar to the natural world; both involve *patterned behaviour* (which, in the social world, resembles law-like relationships) capable of being discovered through careful observation.
- **Objectivism**: The social world, governed by causal relationships, has an objective existence over and above the control of individuals.

Human society, therefore, consists of identifiable patterns of behaviour (we go to school, work, form families, and so forth) that must have *social causes* and such causality, from this position, resides in:

Social structures: Although the social and natural worlds are different (people have consciousness and are aware of themselves and their surroundings in a way that rocks, for example, are not), this 'problem of difference' is resolved by arguing that social behaviour is a:

Reaction to stimulation (deriving from structural imperatives such as socialisation, for example). In other words, behaviour can be studied and explained by understanding

the *cause* of the reaction (structural pressures) rather than the effect (individual actions).

Positivist epistemology rests on objective forms of knowledge – the idea that proof must be based on empirical evidence. Reliable and valid knowledge, for positivist science, doesn't rest on the idea that something is true or false on the basis of things like faith, trust, personal conviction or prejudice. Ideally, truth or falsity rests on:

Replication: For something to be considered true (or 'not false') it has to be *repeatedly* shown to be true, which has clear implications for the direction of:

Positivist methodology: An important concept here is *reliability*, considered in terms of:

- **Input**: This refers to how sociologists organise their research, in terms of both the overall methodological procedures (**Popper's** hypothetico-deductive model would, for example, be appropriate here) and the specific methods used.
- **Output**: The research data produced should, *in principle*, be capable of *replication* by other researchers as a way of both producing reliable knowledge and checking that previous researchers actually followed the methodological principles they claimed to follow.



Weeding the path

In methodological terms, it's both *possible* and *desirable* to *quantify* human behaviour for a couple of reasons:

- **Comparison**: *Quantification* establishes an objective platform from which to compare behavioural changes (such as marriage rates). Quantification, therefore,

is sometimes seen as ‘an end in itself’, and *validity* (greater depth and detail) is sacrificed for higher levels of reliability. However, quantification may also be the basis for *speculation* about possible explanations. By comparing data it’s easier to identify possible relationships and, therefore, construct theoretical explanations (rather than simply provide *descriptions*).

Although *quantitative* data are often portrayed as being more limited in scope and depth than *qualitative* data, the reverse can sometimes be true. By identifying and quantifying relationships the sociologist can speculate about their *causal* basis. For example, the fact that female educational achievement has improved, in terms of exam passes, over the past 25 years is an important piece of quantitative data – but it doesn’t tell us *why* this increase occurred. If we add some additional quantitative data – women as a social group are either staying single or delaying marriage (until their early 30s) – this gives us further evidence; we can, for example, hypothesise that changes in workplace behaviour (women becoming increasingly likely to pursue an independent career) may be a cause of educational improvement.

- **Verification:** Where data are collected and expressed objectively, the potential for cheating, deception or simple human error/misrepresentation is more limited.

Positivist methods reflect the principle that quantifiable, empirical data are considered desirable in sociological research. Methods that are objective, capable of replication and known to produce reliable

data (structured interviews, questionnaires, experiments, controlled (non-participant) observation, and so forth) are, consequently, favoured.

If positivism represents one (ideal) type of sociological research model:

Interpretivism (frequently, if not always accurately, contrasted as an ‘opposing type’) is another we can outline in similar terms.

Interpretist principles

Interpretivist ontology: Because the social world is different to the natural world it cannot be studied in the same way.

Consequently, human behaviour needs to be studied and explained in ways that take account of this fundamental difference in subject matter.

The argument that people act consciously means the social world can be theorised only:

Subjectively – it has no objective existence independent of people’s everyday behaviour. In other words, ‘society’ has no real existence outside of whatever people believe it to be. Aside from suggesting the social world can, at one and the same time, mean different things to different people, a crucial *ontological principle* here is that ‘social reality’ – objective patterns of behaviour we study from time to time – is a subjective projection of whatever people, at a particular moment in time and space, believe it to be. This gives behaviour a constantly shifting quality that’s difficult to explain quantitatively.

Interpretivist epistemology: Questions of proof are considered on two levels:

- **Subjective level:** If ‘reality’ is whatever people believe it to be, the task of the social scientist is to reveal two things.

First, how individuals see their world. This involves questioning and observing people to reveal the depth and detail of their perceptions and understanding since, as **Clarke and Layder (1994)** put it: 'People have thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being ... They define situations and give meaning to their actions and those of others.' **Thomas and Thomas' (1928)** idea of a 'definition of a situation' is interesting here not only because, as they suggested, if people '... define situations as real, they are real in their consequences', but also because it suggests similar people may define the same situation differently (and hence behave differently). This idea also leads to a second:

- **Objective** level of analysis, in the sense that if people share a *common definition* of a situation their behaviour will conform to patterns that may be open to objective quantification (as well as subjective description). An example might be the behaviour of a football crowd – when their favourite team scores we can predict this 'common definition of the situation' will produce a common response. **Misztal (2001)** additionally suggests that concepts of 'normalcy' and 'trust' (where we 'take certain things for granted') are significant factors in the patterning of social behaviour by acting as '... a protective mechanism that prevents chaos and disorder by providing us with feelings of safety, certainty and familiarity'.

Dynamic

If the social world has this twin characteristic – it can be experienced both subjectively and

objectively – this has consequences for how we can study it. Things, for example, that hold true for now (this minute, today, next week) in one society may *not* hold true in the future or in another society. Sociological methodology, therefore, has to be sophisticated enough to reflect the idea that social interaction is a dynamic, constantly changing and evolving process that involves people acting and reacting to the relationships around them. These ideas reflect a further significant idea, that of:

Relativity: If the social world is understood ('interpreted') by different people in different situations in different ways, everything must be *relative* to everything else; nothing, therefore, can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false – all we have is different *versions* of events. For interpretivists, therefore, the choice is between two basic forms of 'reality definition': one constructed by the researcher and imposed on those researched, or one constructed by those researched and expressed through the agency of the researcher.

Interpretivist methodology: The delicate balance between *subjective meanings* (what people think) and the *objective consequences* of group behaviour means that valid data are more likely to be produced by *understanding* how people see and interpret their world. In some respects, therefore, this involves the researcher's deep involvement with the people they are studying – the objective being to reveal, understand and explain behaviour from the viewpoint of those involved; in short, to participate in the behaviour being researched. Data validity, therefore, is usually guaranteed by *qualitative* research methods.

The creation of valid data, in this respect, involves the researcher accurately and

plausibly documenting people's experiences, beliefs, meanings, and so forth, while proof of valid data is based on the ability to experience the world as others experience it. **Weber**, for example, used the term *Verstehen* ('deeper understanding') to suggest that the sociologist can collect valid data by *empathising* with their subject matter – experiencing the world as their subject matter experiences it and, by so doing, arrive at a deeper understanding of social behaviour.



Weeding the path

The 'search for validity' generally has a certain trade-off in terms of data *reliability* – this is more difficult to achieve. Observed behaviour, for example, has to be recorded systematically, methodically and accurately if it is to be considered reliable.

In general, therefore, interpretivist methodology reflects the idea that the most significant aspect of social behaviour is the creation of:

Meanings – and it follows that the task of the sociologist is to reveal and understand the meanings people bring to and take from social interaction. If people actively (if not always consciously or deliberately) create their world, any attempt to establish cause-and-effect relationships is unlikely to yield a great deal of useful information. In this respect, we can think of social behaviour as resembling a:

Chaotic system: Behaviour – although not totally unpredictable – is subject to random variations at the individual level studied by interactionist sociologists. The task of *science*, from this position, is quite different to conventional definitions of both science and the role of the scientist; the scientific role here is one of *understanding*

(which may or may not lead to explanation), *not* prediction.

Interpretivist methods: Where data validity is preferred to reliability, research methods that help the sociologist understand social situations from the participant's viewpoint are favoured. *Qualitative* methods, such as unstructured interviews and participant observation, are frequently used by interpretivists because the research objective is to explore and understand behaviour in all its depth and detail – something that's difficult to do using a closed questionnaire.

This is not to say that other types of research method have no place in interpretivist methodology – interpretivism, as we've suggested, is not purely and exclusively concerned with creating qualitative data. Experimental methods, for example, have been used to demonstrate certain features of the social world. For example, **Garfinkel's** (1967):

Breaching experiments show how to demonstrate both the existence of unobservable features of the social world (norms, for example) and the various ways people 'construct reality' by deliberately 'breaching social expectations' and observing the outcome. **Garfinkel** sent student researchers into restaurants where they were instructed to deliberately 'mistake' customers for waiters while the latter's reactions were observed secretly.

A contemporary example here is **Mann et al.'s** (2003) 'sousveillance' breaching experiments, one of which involved going into shops that had security cameras (surveillance of customers) and 'reversing this gaze' by filming the shop assistants as they served customers and recording their reactions.

One objective of this experiment was to demonstrate how surveillance has become an accepted, everyday, *uncontested* part of life in modern societies.



Digging deeper: Methodologies

Thus far we've looked at methodology in terms of positivism and interpretivism and suggested the conventional way of viewing them in terms of what postmodernists call:

Binary oppositions: 'Binary' means something can be one of two states – 'off' or 'on', for example – and their relationship is one of exclusion (if something is 'on', it can't be 'off' at the same time). This idea is a familiar one in Western society, as the example on the following page demonstrates.

Realist principles

With this in mind we can dig a little deeper by looking, first, at an alternative explanation for the relationship between theory and method in terms of a:



Growing it yourself: Breaching experiments

Breaching experiments can be both fun and informative (although you have to be careful for *ethical* reasons that any disruption that occurs doesn't cause the 'victim' emotional pain or distress). In small groups, try some of the following (or invent your own ways of disrupting norms):

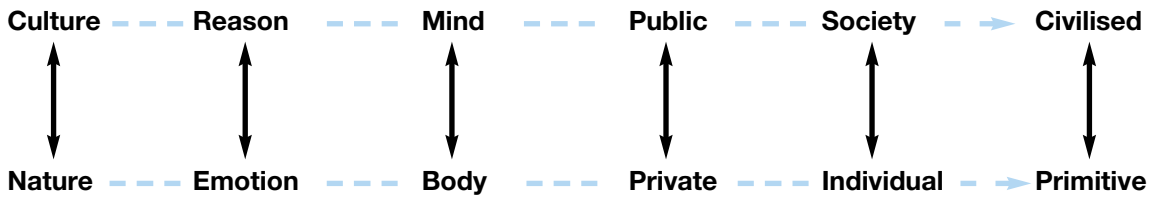
- Ask directions from someone in the street and, once they've explained which direction to go, walk off the opposite way.
- 'Tip' someone – 10p for example – for information (as in the above situation). This could also be done in another teacher's classroom – ask a question and then tip the teacher.
- Two students stand talking in a narrow hallway, leaving roughly 4 feet between them, but with space behind each student and the wall.
- Test 'window-shopping' norms. How far away from a shop window can someone stand before their presence is ignored by passers-by?
- In a public space (like a library or classroom), place a coat over the back of any empty chair.
- Go into McDonald's and ask for a product from another fast-food chain, such as a Whopper (Burger King) – be persistent and insist they serve you.

During the experiment all behaviour should be systematically and accurately recorded (this will involve some preparation and the allocation of different roles).

Report your findings (and conclusions you can draw about social behaviour) to the class.

If you don't have the time and/or inclination to perform any of these breaching experiments, identify and briefly explain some possible ethical considerations involved in such experiments.

Binary oppositions: Ridgeway (1997)



Realist conception of science:

Realist ontology: Although realism is sometimes called ‘*post-positivism*’ (Trochim, 2002), this is not entirely accurate since we find examples of realism in the work of writers like **Marx** and **Durkheim**, but we find features of *positivism* in their work too, with one point of convergence between the two methodologies being that both accept the social world has:

Objective features (or **structures**) that can be studied scientifically since, as we’ve suggested, social structures have an independent existence from people. Structures, in this respect, are ‘real forces’ in our everyday lives of work, family, culture and so forth and although the social and natural worlds are different, the basic principles involved in the study of each are similar. The ‘real’ features of social systems, for example, make it possible to establish causal relationships. Realists, however, add the proviso here that causality will be *limited* in time and space (what is true in one context may not be true in another).

Realist epistemology: Empirical evidence through direct observation is *desirable*, but not in itself sufficient. Realists suggest the structures we experience ‘as real’ (and which positivists, for example, argue are what must be studied) are the product of ‘hidden

mechanisms and forces’ that may *not* be directly observable. For example, **Durkheim’s** (1897) analysis of suicide involves the idea that it can be explained in terms of how the individual is socially *regulated* and *integrated* and since these are ‘unobservable mechanisms’ acting on people’s behaviour, it follows that they cannot be directly observed. Their *effects*, however, can be measured through the use of various *indicators*.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Explanations of suicide – and how different methodological principles have been applied to the understanding of this behaviour – are considered in more detail in this chapter.

Realist epistemology, therefore, goes beyond ‘simple descriptions’ of causal relationships to discover how such relationships are initially created. The social world ‘as we see and experience it’ is, from this position, governed by the operation of *social processes* we need to understand if we are to explain the observable world (something, realists suggest, that is true for *both* the social and natural sciences).

Example

An example should help to clarify this basic idea. **Soothill and Grover (1995)** argue that the concept of ‘sex crime’ (such as rape, paedophilia and the like) is *socially constructed* through the media; in other words, ‘sex crime’ is real, in that it’s possible to empirically identify people who are both ‘criminals’ and ‘victims’:

- **Positivist explanations** of rape, for example, focus on the observable features of a situation – the relationship between the rapist and their victim, their social backgrounds and characteristics, and so forth – in the attempt to explain why such a crime occurs.
- **Realist explanations**, while recognising these things are important, spread the net further to dig deeper into areas that might, on the face of things, seem to have no direct relevance to a sex crime. A realist, for example, would want to examine ideological factors (such as cultural attitudes to gender – do we live in a sexist society, for example) that surround – and contribute to the creation of – a particular social act.

In other words, a ‘real explanation’ of sex crime is more likely to be found by examining the *unobservable* aspects of social life (power and gender relationships, for example) than by simply focusing on directly observable aspects of behaviour.

Realist methodology: These ideas have significant consequences for how we can generate reliable and valid knowledge – the social world, for example, has to be understood in its *totality*. While it’s possible to study particular ‘events’ (such as a crime),

to validly explain *why* people commit crimes we have to think more widely in terms of how the interconnected parts of a social system impact on each other. If you think about this for a moment, two things are apparent:

- **Complexity:** Social research becomes very complicated; for every situation we study we have to understand the social context of the behaviour involved to make sense of it.
- **Science:** Realism reflects the way natural scientists understand and study the world; all phenomena are connected to each other in some way because they are all governed by natural laws. When you repeatedly drop a pen and it falls to the floor, the ‘unobservable mechanism’ that explains this regularity is gravity.

Triangulate

Given the above, realists see reliability and validity in terms of constructing both an overall (‘in depth’) view of social behaviour in different contexts (something shared with *interpretivists*) and, at the same time, producing specific, causal-type explanations for behaviour (something they share with *positivists*). We can use the concept of:

Triangulation to illustrate a realist methodological approach. Different research methods have different strengths and weaknesses; questionnaires, for example, may produce reliable data, but with low validity, while the reverse is true for covert participant observation. For realists this reflects the nature of the social world – no single method can capture its complexity; since all have weaknesses, the obvious thing to do is to *combine* different methods so that the weaknesses of one can be offset by the strengths of another.



Methodological triangulation: Harvey and MacDonald (1993)

1. Two or more researchers using same research technique
2. One researcher using two or more research techniques
3. Two or more researchers using two or more research techniques

As Trochim (2002) argues, if all research methods contain the capacity for *error*, the only sensible thing is to combine methods so that one type of error cancels out another, an idea called *methodological triangulation*.

This type of triangulation has a range of uses in terms of:

- **collecting** different types of data (qualitative and quantitative, primary and secondary)
- **checking** data reliability and validity
- **comparison:** different researchers using the same method can compare data for similarities and differences
- **confirmation:** verifying the accuracy of different types of data.

Just as research methods are *inherently error prone*, so too, for realists, are theoretical positions – and the way to resolve this is through:

Theoretical triangulation: Different theoretical perspectives have their strengths and their weaknesses that, again, can be used to the researcher's advantage. The argument here is that by looking at the

social world in terms of *both* structure *and* action we can arrive at the best possible representation and explanation of social behaviour.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: *The New Criminology* (Taylor, Walton and Young, 1973) is an example of an attempt to apply a realist methodology to an understanding of deviance.

Realist methods focus on gaining a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to get the fullest possible research picture. Primary sources such as questionnaires and interviews and secondary sources such as official statistics may be used to develop empirical indicators of underlying, non-observable causalities, while observational methods may similarly be used to reveal, for example, people's underlying beliefs and assumptions.

Postmodern principles

The final methodological position we can examine is:

Postmodernism: Although this position involves a range of ideas that makes it difficult to explain in terms of traditional forms of sociological perspective, we can identify some general features of postmodernism in the following ways:

Postmodern ontology: This involves thinking about two distinctive definitional strands – one that focuses on what postmodernism *is not* and the other that focuses on the fundamental principles of postmodernism. In terms of the first idea, postmodernism represents a:

Critique of modernism: This involves, as we've suggested, the idea that concepts like 'truth' and 'objectivity' are inherently *subjective* constructions that need to be considered as narratives within a scientific discourse. In other words, such ideas represent *stories* that describe the social world from a particular position of power, rather than unequivocal, objective features of that world.

In terms of the second idea, postmodernism is:

Constructivist, in the sense of seeking to describe how narratives and discourses develop and disappear – a preoccupation that involves ideas about *subjective experiences*, considered in two main ways:

- **Personal subjectivities** – how people experience and reflect on the social world in terms of their particular beliefs, values, norms, identities, and so forth.
- **Social subjectivities:** Personal experience is grounded in the experiences and activities of others. Traditionally, for example, one way of expressing this idea is to think about areas like primary and secondary socialisation and how the behaviour of others (such as parents,

friends and the media) impacts on how we see both ourselves and the social world.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Mass media: This idea reflects the notion that each individual is both the *producer* and *product* of society, something that can be illustrated by the idea of weblogs – information systems that bypass 'traditional' media organisation and practice. We can also think in terms of how the internet is evolving in more cooperative ways. (See 'Growing it yourself' on the next page.)

Relative: in a subjective world it follows that all explanations are relative, something Troest (1999) identifies as the claim that we have no way of objectively distinguishing that which is true from that which is false. Is it possible, for example, to objectively demonstrate the superiority of one set of beliefs over another?

In this respect, concepts of reliability and validity are social constructs inherently relative in time and space, an idea Curran and Takata (2004) take to its logical conclusion by observing that, for postmodernists, there is no possibility of 'a unifying overall truth' or 'unifying overall metanarrative that could tell the ultimate "truth" for humans'.

Postmodern epistemology would, on the face of things, seem to be a contradiction in terms, since the *relativity* of knowledge makes questions of proof redundant – Lyon (1994) suggests 'postmodern philosophy claims there can be no ultimate epistemology upon which to base our search for knowledge'.

In this respect, postmodernists argue we need to redefine the role of the sociologist; rather than seeing sociology as being a quest



Growing it yourself: Write here, write now

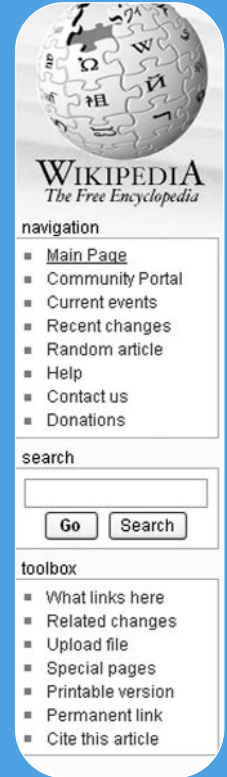
An interesting illustration of this idea is the **Wikipedia** (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), a 'free encyclopaedia written collaboratively by people from around the world'. The English version currently has around 600,000 articles.

Start at the main sociology page (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology>) and explore what it has to say about this topic. You are not, however, restricted to a *consumer* role. Once you get a feel for the interface (have a look at the Help page if necessary), you can develop a *producer* role by creating and adding material to the Wikipedia for the world to see (and, of course, to criticise and edit).

Class exercise: Add information about 'A level sociology' to the Wikipedia.

You should plan what you want to say, keeping in mind that if others disagree they can edit your words, just as you can edit theirs.

You can either submit your contribution as a class or, if you prefer, once you've discussed the general areas you want to cover, divide into groups and assign each group a topic to research and write.



for 'truth' (by attempting to evaluate the differing 'claims' put forward by, for example, scientific and religious discourses), the *epistemological* role of the sociologist becomes one of *describing* competing claims to truth. This involves, according to **Yeatman** (1994), a rejection of the assumption that knowledge about the world somehow 'stands outside' the individual in a way 'free of the power regimes in which it is constructed'. In other words, a sociological epistemology should focus on understanding and describing the power relationships that give rise to knowledge, rather than seeking to distinguish between different forms of knowledge in terms of concepts like reliability and validity (which are themselves just one more form of subjective categorisation).

In the context of postmodern epistemology, therefore, knowledge is not just individually and culturally relative, it is also the outcome of historical and cultural *power struggles*. The role of sociology, in this respect, becomes one of understanding *why* some forms of knowledge are considered 'more reliable' or 'more valid' than others in different cultures and at different times.

Postmodern methodology: These epistemological arguments can be related to methodology in two general ways:

Discourse

The world consists, at different times and in different places, of competing discourses. At times, one discourse may become the dominant mode of explanation and at other times no single discourse is able to dominate.

The key point, however, is that we are simply talking about different interpretations of the world between which we have no objective way of discriminating. The ‘search for objectivity’, therefore, is a symptom of the way knowledge is organised by powerful interest groups – something is true *not* because it has some inherent quality of truth, but because powerful groups are able to define it as true. As **Crebbin** (2000) puts it: ‘Knowledge and meanings are . . . culturally and historically situated, and saturated with previous power contests. Knowledge is therefore understood to be political, contested, and diverse.’

Deconstruction

As befits a term originated by postmodernists (the concept is usually attributed to **Derrida**), **Rorty** (1995) suggests its meaning has changed and developed over the last 40 years in ways, somewhat ironically, unintended by its author. For our purpose, however, we can think of this idea in a relatively simple way: **Marling** (2001) suggests a ‘loose definition’ involves the idea of ‘taking something apart’ (a narrative or discourse, for example) to show how it has been socially constructed – to lay bare, in effect, the various elements by which a particular, ‘taken-for-granted’ set of meanings has certain ideological characteristics. **Boles** (2003), therefore, suggests deconstruction involves ‘the process by which the audience identifies the elements that make up the construction of meaning within a text’.

An important aspect of postmodern methodology, therefore, is the ability to ‘deconstruct texts’ (anything that involves language), something linked to our previous observations about *epistemology* – the best we

can do is understand how people construct their beliefs. In this respect, **Neuman** (2000) suggests postmodern methodology has the following characteristics:

- **Subjectivity:** Rather than seeking the impossible (objectivity), postmodernists combine ‘intuition, imagination, personal experience, and emotion’ to produce descriptive interpretations.
- **Relativity:** The postmodern world consists of ‘infinite interpretations’, none of which is (objectively) superior or inferior.
- **Representation:** All forms of research are representations of whatever is being studied. Research, therefore, consists of different ‘representations of truth’ (as conceived by the researcher, the researched, the reader, and so forth) rather than ‘truth’ itself. **Usher** (1996) argues that academic texts are always partial in the sense that they are subjective narratives that must conform to the ‘rules and language games’ of academic discourse. **Coffey** (2000) captures the idea of both postmodern research and the role of the researcher when he notes, ‘I am not an innocent bystander’ – all research, in other words, is necessarily partial (in the sense of being constructed from a particular viewpoint).

These ideas do, of course, make it difficult to discuss:

Postmodern methods in the way we conventionally discuss research methods.

This follows for a couple of reasons:

- **Society:** **Coffey** (2000) suggests postmodern perceptions of ‘society’ lean towards seeing it, in **Deleuze** and **Guattari’s** (1987) terms, as a:

- **Rhizomatic structure:** This involves ‘a system without a trunk that has no pattern and expands endlessly from any of its points in all directions’ – the internet being a classic example of this idea. It has no clearly defined structure and is constantly being made and remade through the interaction of its users – just like ‘society’. The question here, of course, is, how is it possible to study such a phenomenon?
- **Research:** In the above sense, trying to study ‘society’ is like trying to step into a river in the same place twice; each time you step off the bank (even if it’s exactly the same spot), the water you step into is not the same water.



The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one implication of this idea for *each* of the concepts of reliability and validity.

For these reasons, postmodern research tends not to focus on conventional or traditional research techniques. There is, after all, little apparent point in trying to quantify something (human behaviour) that’s both changing as you measure it and changed in unknown ways by your presence – a postmodern researcher would probably find it more interesting and fruitful to understand the researcher’s reasons for

Discussion point: The meaning of love

Each member of the class should reflect for a few minutes on the meaning of the word ‘love’. Make a few notes about what – if anything – this idea means to you.

As a class, share the meanings you’ve identified (write them on the board for all to see). The authors of each idea should then briefly elaborate on the meanings they attribute to ‘love’.

Once you start to think about it (to ‘deconstruct’ or ‘unpack’ this simple word), things start to get rather complicated rather quickly. Think about and briefly discuss, for example, the following:

- How do you know when you are ‘in love’ (what are the indicators and, more importantly, how do you know these are indicators?)
- How can you describe ‘love’ – both the idea and the (emotional) feeling?
- Is it possible to be ‘in love’ with more than one person at the same time? Do you have to fall ‘out of love’ with someone you previously loved before you can fall ‘in love’ with someone else, and if so, why?
- How is ‘the meaning of love’ specified through language (what words, for example, give expression to love and is it possible to express the ‘meaning of love’ in words)?
- How does our culture restrict or expand the meaning of love (think, for example, about ideas such as heterosexual and homosexual love, monogamous and polygamous love)?
- Is love ‘natural’ or just the meaning we give to sexual attraction?

wanting to carry out such research. Research methods, therefore, generally reflect ideas about *discourse analysis* and *deconstruction*, applied in various ways to an understanding of both:

- **Living texts** (people). The objective here is to ‘read’ how people construct and reconstruct personal narratives by understanding the rules on which such constructions are built. **Bowker** (2001) studied ‘identity exploration within an online community’, through the use of internet relay chat (IRC) because she was interested in the cultural dynamics of the interaction involved in this medium.
- **Dead texts** – books, film, newspapers and the like. These are only ‘dead’ in the sense that the researcher is trying to deconstruct, for example, the meanings inherent in a particular text.

Moving on

In this section, the discussion of possible relationships between theory and method has, at times, raised questions about concepts such as subjectivity, objectivity and value-freedom, and we can examine these ideas in more depth and detail in the next section.

4. Debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value-freedom

Debates about concepts like value-freedom help us to both firm up the ideas about science and the scientific status of sociology we’ve previously discussed and lay the framework for subsequent discussion, in the final section, about the relationship between sociology and social policy.



Preparing the ground: Value-freedom

The term ‘value-freedom’ is a little misleading since it implies human behaviour (in this instance, sociological research) can somehow be ‘free from the influence of values’. This, of course, is not possible since all human behaviour is guided by values. An alternative way of thinking about this idea, therefore, is in terms of:

Value-neutrality

If it’s not possible to ‘act without values’, the best we can do is recognise the various points at which values potentially (or actually) intrude into the research process and adjust our research strategy accordingly. For example, a researcher needs to ensure any conclusions they draw from their research are not influenced by personal prejudices. **Dentler** (2002) suggests debates surrounding concepts of value-neutrality fall into two main camps – is value-neutrality:

- **Possible?** Can sociologists control the intrusion of their values into the research process?
- **Desirable?** Not all sociologists believe sociology can – or should – adopt a value-neutral approach. Writers as diverse in their approach as **Marx** (1845) and **Gouldner** (1962), for example, have variously argued that sociology (and sociological research) should reflect a:
 - **Committed approach** to identifying and promoting social change. **Marx’s** famous (1845) statement that ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world . . . the point is to change it’ gives a flavour of this approach.

WARM-UP: RESEARCH ETHICS

In small groups:

1 Identify some examples of possible research that fit the following categories:

Always unethical	Sometimes unethical	Never unethical
Threatening someone with a gun 'to see how they react'	Secretly observing people	Content analysis?

2 Each group should share their examples with the other groups and briefly justify their categorisation of each research example.

3 Identify research examples where value-neutrality is not an option for sociologists.

4 What conclusions can be drawn about the role of values in sociological research?

Whatever your commitment to these positions, the debate is complicated by:

- **Practical research considerations**, relating to the *choices* a sociologist must make in order to carry out research, which involve issues such as:
- **Choice of topic:** Decisions about what, or who, to study are influenced by values in many ways, such as whether you intend to study the activities of:
 - The **powerful**, as in, for example, **Pearce's** (1998) study of corporate criminality in the chemical industry
 - The **powerless**, where the choice is almost endless – **Davis'** (1967) study of the social processes involved in 'becoming a prostitute' is one example among many – or
 - The **powerful and the powerless** in combination – **Chambliss** (1978) compared the different experiences of school students from privileged and less privileged social backgrounds.

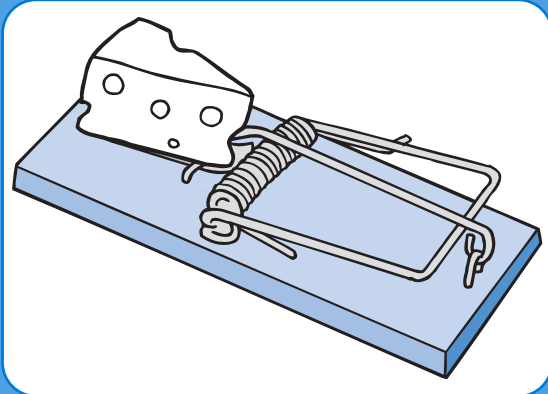
Choice of topic may also be influenced by:

- **Funding:** This idea relates not only to *what* is studied but also to *how* it is studied and *why* it is studied – an idea related to a further (ethical) issue:
- **Purpose:** The question of whether a researcher should be held accountable for the purpose to which their research is put is something that can be argued over. However, there are instances where researchers have set out to implement government social policies that are ethically questionable. 'Project Camelot', for example, was a research project funded in the early 1960s by the US government and military, designed to influence the internal politics and development of nation states (in this instance, Chile) (**Horowitz**, 1967; **Solovey**, 2001).
- **Choice of method:** In many ways the research method(s) chosen by, or forced on, the researcher reflects beliefs about how it's possible to study social behaviour (quantitatively or qualitatively, for



The potting shed

Building a better mousetrap?



How might sociological research help the powerful control the activities of the powerless?

example) and, indeed, about the nature of the social world itself (whether it can – or should – be studied objectively, for example).



Digging deeper: Value-freedom

Theoretical issues are an important consideration relating to the values held by sociologists:

- **Ontological beliefs** influence the general perspective a researcher adopts when making decisions about how to study behaviour. Postmodern and interactionist ontologies, for example, focus on the more subjective aspects of knowledge, whereas positivist and realist perspectives adopt a more objective general attitude and orientation.

- **Epistemological beliefs** also come into play here because these types of values affect how a sociologist approaches questions such as how to collect data, the different levels of proof required in the research process or even, in the case of some postmodernists, whether concepts of proof are inherently subjective (and, therefore, out of the question entirely).
- **Methodological beliefs** influence perceptions of *reliability* and *validity* and, in turn, our choice of research method.

Ethics

Surrounding these ideas are:

Ethical questions: At various points in the research process these questions assume different levels of significance. At a fundamental level sociologists have to confront their beliefs about their subject matter – whether people are seen, for example, as ‘equal participants’ in a research process in which their active involvement is encouraged, or as ‘research objects’ to be questioned and observed in whatever way the researcher deems appropriate. On another level, natural scientists don’t have to address the problem of a rock protesting vehemently if they throw it into a tank of water to see whether it sinks or floats (although this is *not* to say there are no ethical problems in the natural sciences). A sociologist attempting the same ‘experiment’ with a person would, rightly, be considered to be acting unethically.



Weeding the path

This example raises the question of whether ‘value-neutrality’ is automatically desirable in sociological research. There are situations where sociologists are encouraged to act on

their values (or those of the communities in which they live and work) and, rather than seeing this as a weakness of the social-scientific approach, it may represent a strength in terms of its responsiveness to people's beliefs and feelings.

Before we turn to discussing concepts of objectivity and subjectivity, it's important that we don't confuse these ideas: value-neutrality, for example, is *not* the same as objectivity, just as value-commitment is *not* the same as subjectivity. This separation is particularly important in terms of the relationship between:

Theory and methods in the sense that value-neutrality isn't a concept (in which you either believe or you don't) that's somehow attached to particular theoretical positions – most obviously and conventionally, in terms of the idea that 'positivists' use objective methods and *therefore* their methodology is value-neutral, whereas 'anti-positivists' use subjective methods, *therefore* their methodology is value-committed. It is, however, possible to show a commitment to value-neutrality and objectivity in terms of research methods, while simultaneously employing a subjective methodology, an idea we can briefly explore in the following way:

Methods: All forms of science have to address and resolve the 'problem of values' – although there is a difference in kind between the biologist who studies the behaviour of human cells and the sociologist who studies the behaviour of humans in cells, the fundamental point is that a *choice* has to be made: does the biologist try to develop a cure for AIDS or a new anti-ageing cream? Does the sociologist research ways to keep people out of prison or more effective ways to put people in prison?

Limiting effects

Coser (1977) argues that choice is always 'value relevant' and can never be wholly value-neutral. However, once choices have been made (what to study and how to study it, for example), value-neutrality (or at least this interpretation of the term) involves the scientist *recognising* their values and, by so doing, not imposing them on the research process. Once we accept there is a distinction to be made between 'relevance' and 'neutrality', the main question becomes one of how to *limit* the effect of values and, in terms of methods, this involves adopting, as we've suggested, an objective approach that operates on two levels (reflecting a general form of scientific ethos):

- **Practices:** On this level all researchers should be objective in terms of how they carry out their research – apply research methods impartially and ethically, don't falsify data, and so forth.
- **Assumptions:** On a second level, sociologists, like their natural scientist counterparts, should clearly state any value-relevant *assumptions*. In other words, they should make *explicit* the values they hold relating to their research so that these assumptions may be questioned, challenged or changed by other researchers. We can note, in passing, a distinction here between:
 - **Epistemic values** that relate to the fundamental values of a science. These represent implicit scientific values (such as, in natural science, the concept of cause and effect) that are so ingrained in the value system of the science, they are *assumed* rather than always explicitly stated.

- **Non-epistemic values** (ethical, political, and so forth) that *do* need to be made explicit by the researcher since these may introduce *uncontrolled* forms of bias into the research process. A sociologist with strong religious views researching atheism would need to acknowledge clearly their values, since this information would be relevant to the audience's ability to evaluate the research produced.



Preparing the ground: Objectivity and subjectivity

Objectivity has three distinctive, but interrelated, meanings:

Ethics

- **Ethical** objectivity refers to the way a sociologist behaves when conducting, analysing and presenting their research. This is something to which all sociologists (at least in principle) aspire, in the sense that they are honest and accurate in their work, whether this involves recording answers given during an interview, observing the behaviour of people during an experiment or detailing the researcher's experiences while living with a group as part of a participant observation study.

Conduct

- **Research conduct:** Although general ethical questions surrounding social research are important, they represent *epistemic* values in the sense one would *trust* that no sociologist embarks on a piece of research with the explicit intention of producing something

inaccurate or deceitful. However, a second meaning to objectivity refers to how the researcher actually studies behaviour and involves choices surrounding personal demeanour, in terms of, for example:

- **Personal detachment** – the researcher does not become 'personally involved' with the people they are studying and, therefore, attempts to maintain a:
- **Social distance** from the object of their research.

In this respect, 'objective' research methods reflect the idea that, as far as humanly possible, the researcher *doesn't* interact with their research subjects in ways that influence how these subjects behave. 'Subjective' research methods, however, involve the researcher participating, with varying levels of interaction, in the research process: unstructured interviews, for example, involve little or no personal interaction (the researcher simply records what they are told), whereas covert participant observation involves high levels of interaction. For this type of method the purpose, of course, is to get as close as possible to understanding the reasons for people's behaviour (either through allowing them to talk or by observing and experiencing their behaviour). The key idea here, therefore, is:

- **Objective knowledge** – the idea that it is possible to get at some idea (or version) of 'truth' – whether this version is one generated by maintaining a *social distance* and *emotional detachment* or by becoming so intimately involved in the research process that the researcher becomes, in effect, a crucial part of the research itself.

We need to note here that the concept of

objective knowledge is an elastic one that can be stretched in various ways – from the idea of knowledge that is ‘reliable, valid and capable of generalisation’, to knowledge that simply describes some aspect of social behaviour.

Whatever your particular methodological take on the status of knowledge, the basic idea here is that we can generate some form of objective knowledge about subjective states and behaviours. To take a simple example, if I tell you a joke and you laugh, then it’s probably reasonable to assume that, even though the data were produced by our subjective interaction (you wouldn’t have laughed if I hadn’t told you the joke), you are laughing because you found the joke funny (objective knowledge about your sense of humour).

Reality

These ideas are closely related to a *third meaning* of objectivity and subjectivity:

Social reality: If sociologists have different beliefs about how to collect and interpret research data, it follows that these beliefs are based on different ways of seeing both the nature of the social world and how sociologists should research it. In other words, this relates to how different sociologists see the nature of the thing (social behaviour) they are studying; in basic terms, there are two main ways to understand this idea:

- **Objective** sociology, as **Mulder** (2004) notes, involves the idea that the object of study (whether it be people or inanimate objects) ‘... exists independent of the researcher’s perception of it ... the object would “be there,” as it is, even if no-one perceived it’. This meaning of objectivity,

he argues, is ‘typically associated with ideas such as reality, truth and reliability’.

- **Subjective** sociology involves the idea that human behaviour is something that cannot be validly studied independently of the people who create it. In this respect, we can talk about:
 - **‘Hard’ subjectivity**, a position associated with *postmodernists*, for example, that argues it’s impossible to separate the influence of the researcher from the people or things being researched.
 - **‘Soft’ subjectivity**, a position we could associate with *interactionism*, that argues that the researcher can distance themselves sufficiently from their research object in order to describe social behaviour. Such descriptions will be *representations* of behaviour only at a particular moment, but they do have greater validity than the observations of non-sociologists.

A couple of general points are worth noting before we explore the ramifications of these ideas:

Theoretical preferences: What we believe about the social world determines what we collect evidence about and, of course, how we go about the task of collecting evidence. At a minimum, theoretical preferences will influence what we believe, as **Weber** argues, ‘is worthy of being known’ (and, by extension, how it is possible or permissible to know it).

Values determine preferences: Complete value-freedom is impossible since values inform everything we do; just as they influence how we see the world, they also influence decisions about the worth of different types of knowledge.



Digging deeper: Objectivism and subjectivism

We can develop our thoughts about the meaning – and consequences – of different ways of understanding social behaviour in terms of two positions:

- **Objectivism** refers to looking at the social world in terms of it having an independent existence from the people who make up that world. In other words, this general position holds that sociologists can study objective features of the social world – whether in broadly *positivist* or broadly *realist* terms – that have some form of permanence and solidity (institutions such as families, educational systems, and so forth).
- **Subjectivism**: From this position social behaviour is qualitatively different to the behaviour of non-conscious matter. If, therefore, the social world is created through subjective behaviours, sociological theories and methods – from both interactionist and postmodern positions, for example – must reflect this difference. In this respect there can be no theoretical or practical separation between the subject (the researcher) and the object of study ('society'). What may be considered valid knowledge 'yesterday' may not constitute valid knowledge 'today' or 'tomorrow'.

Although the above is a simplified *dichotomy* that ignores differences *within* these categories (between interactionist and postmodern positions, for example) and similarities *between* categories (realism may have more in common with interactionism than it does with positivism), we can examine these two broad positions in more detail:

Objectivism involves a range of further ideas:

Reality: At root, there is something 'real' that exists independently of the observer. Although people may, at various times, believe in multiple realities, only one is *actually* real and it can, ultimately, be:

Experienced directly or indirectly. By applying a scientific methodology (theory building, careful observation, and so forth) we can identify various elements from which reality is constructed. In other words, scientific procedures eventually lead the researcher to some form of:

Discovery: Just as natural scientists have progressively uncovered the rules, laws and procedures on which the physical world is based, so too, in their different ways, can social scientists discover the objective basis of social behaviour – an idea that works on two levels:

- **System-wide**, where the objective is to uncover the principles on which whole societies (or systems) are based, and
- **System-specific**, where we see the operation of these principles, as in, for example, **Durkheim's** explanation of suicide or **Michels'** (1911) *iron law of oligarchy*.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The iron law of oligarchy is discussed in more detail in relation to elite theories of power.

Value-neutrality is possible in that the fundamental principles on which behaviour is based (the 'social laws' of some forms of *positivism*, for example) can be identified and studied independently of a researcher's

value-commitment. Such principles would remain true regardless of whether the researcher wanted them to be true. The guarantor of value-neutrality is ethical and methodological objectivity.

Cumulation: The idea that knowledge is cumulative is important for:

Knowledge-building: The development of theories and explanations of ever greater complexity and explanatory power is possible once factual knowledge is established.

These ideas give sociology a *structural* focus since they make assumptions about both the nature of the social world and, by extension, the subject matter of sociology – in particular, an overwhelming concern with the:

Problem of order: From this position, if we can establish patterns and regularities in human behaviour (such as suicide) this would suggest some form of external constraint on individual actions and behaviours.

Social facts

In terms of this example, **Durkheim** (1897) theorised the existence of social structures in terms of a *collective consciousness* – a general set of beliefs about what is good, proper, right, and so forth – that arises from the interaction process within society. The *collective conscience* is rooted in individual behaviour, but takes on an *externalised* form because people's relationships produce norms, values, routines and responsibilities that appear (to all intents and purposes) to exist over and above the individual's personal beliefs, desires and actions. In this respect, therefore, we experience the world as an *external reality* that constrains our choices of action. Thus:

Social facts exist which, **Durkheim** (1895) argues, we can consider as 'things' that can be studied sociologically. Just as there are facts we can discover about the natural world, facts associated with human behaviour can also be discovered and explained. **Dawe** (1970) expresses this idea thus: 'Since individuals cannot of their own volition ("unaided") create and maintain order, constraint is necessary for society to exist at all; without it, the only possibility is the war of all against all. Accordingly, society must define the social meanings, relationships and actions of its members for them. And, because it is thus assigned priority over them, it must in some sense be self-generating and self-maintaining.'

Stimulus – response

The basis of the objectivist argument, therefore, is that subjective states (the meanings and interpretations that guide individual behaviours) are the product of relationships operating at the structural level of society. Human behaviour, in this respect, is considered, as **Dawe** suggests, to be the result of some form of:

External stimulation: Just as in the natural world where the behaviour of matter – such as an apple falling to the ground – is determined by the operation of *physical forces*, human behaviour is theorised as the result of a complex interplay of *social forces* (whatever these may actually turn out to be – the socialisation process, the workings of economic markets or whatever).

In this respect – to continue the analogy – if a natural scientist wants to understand why apples always fall to the ground rather than float into the air, they do not ask the apple; they study the forces

that propel apples to behave as they do. Similarly, from this position, to understand people's behaviour there's little or no point studying and questioning the individuals involved; rather, we need to understand the *social forces* that compel people to behave in particular ways. If, on this basis, individual action is a product of external social stimuli, it follows that such stimuli can be isolated, researched and explained in an objective, scientific way – an argument that, if valid, resolves two main problems:

- **Subjective meanings** cease to be a variable in the explanation of human behaviour because they are theorised as an 'effect' of structural 'causes'.
- **Objective analysis** is possible because we have removed the element of subjective interpretation (and uncertainty) from the equation.



Weeding the path

We can note some critical ideas relating to this position in terms of:

Facts: An important aspect of objectivity is the ability to weigh evidence carefully – to accept that which is true and reject that which is false. This deceptively simple statement does, however, have a sharp sting in the tail, namely on what basis is it possible to distinguish truth from falsity in the social world? In other words, how do we recognise a fact when we see it? In the natural sciences, facts are established by repeated observations and confirmations – every apple that's ever been seen to fall from a tree has always fallen to the ground. In the social world, facts are less clear-cut; if you fall out of a tree, how you react will differ

depending on the context of the behaviour (you might laugh, swear, cry, scream or whatever, depending on a range of factors – who you are, where you are, who you're with, what you were doing in the tree).

Measurement: Even if we assume that 'social facts' exist, a couple of further questions need to be asked. First, do social facts have the same qualities as facts in the natural world? Are facts 'waiting to be discovered' by the social scientist or are they, as interpretivists argue, socially constructed?

Criteria

Second, how can we measure facts? In the natural sciences this is possible because the measuring criterion can be standardised and tested 'against reality'. We know, for example, that 'time' exists for a couple of reasons – things change and time itself changes the further away from the Earth one goes. The problem in the social sciences is that the criteria we use to 'measure facts' are themselves social constructions – which leaves us in the position of trying to measure something objectively on the basis of what are ultimately subjective criteria. This leads us to consider:

Epistemology: In order to verify something is a fact we have to establish criteria against which it can be measured; however, to establish such criteria we have to know what it is we're measuring in the first place. This raises the question of whether we have to know something is 'a fact' before we identify it as such. If this is the case, how can the social world be measured objectively?

Interpretations: If facts are not 'self-evident things', it follows that they have to

be interpreted (or recognised) as facts – and this, of course, can only be done subjectively. As **Kharkhordin** (1991) puts it: ‘Facts without interpretation are impossible, even in natural sciences (the standard of objectivity) a discovery of data is affected by the measurement process.’

If we accept the argument that the social world is not only *quantitatively* different to the natural world, but is also *qualitatively* different, we need to consider an alternative position.

Subjectivism

Subjectivism embodies a number of ideas about the nature of the social world and, by extension, how it’s both possible and desirable to study it. We can look first at some basic ideas before widening the debate slightly to consider questions of subjectivity and value-neutrality.

Realities: A central feature of this position is that ‘reality’ is defined from the position of different social groups, and we need to think, therefore, in terms of ‘multiple realities’ rather than a single ‘reality’. Although this still involves a concept of ‘society’, in the sense that structural relationships (such as *socialisation* processes) affect individual behaviour, it is a different conception to that held by objectivists and means we need to

understand how individuals construct realities that then *reflect back* on their behaviour.

Death of the author

If this is unclear, think about ‘society’ (defined in terms of the structure of our social relationships) as being like the author of a book. The author constructs a reality (a story or narrative) we enter as we read. However, whatever the ultimate intentions of the author, each reader *interprets* the narrative in different ways, some of which are intended by the author, but many of which are different for each reader. Thus, when **Barthes** (1968) talks about ‘the death of the author’, he’s suggesting there is no single author of a text because each reader reconstructs it in different ways through the meanings they give to the narrative. As he puts it: ‘The death of the author is the birth of the reader.’

If we think of this in terms of the relationship between ‘society’ and the ‘individual’, the former is not ‘the author’ of the latter – people are not simply blank pages on which the author (society) writes. On the contrary, from a subjectivist position it is ‘society’ that is the book (something that has a particular historical structure) and people who are the authors of their own narratives or, to paraphrase **Keep et al.**



Growing it yourself: The structure of groups

Split into small groups, each choosing a different social group (family, school class, gender, ethnic group, etc.).

Identify and briefly explain examples of ‘structural demands’ made by group membership on the individuals involved.

(2000): ‘The author (“society”) is not simply a ‘person’ (“thing”) but a socially and historically constituted subject.’

Whenever you join (through choice or *ascription*) a group, therefore, you become subject to a range of ‘structural pressures’ – people within the group ‘make demands’ on your behaviour. However, you also help maintain group structure – by conforming and contributing to demands.

Values: Although, as **Williams** (2005) suggests, the researcher must strive for objectivity in their work, ‘... values are ever present in investigation’. However, rather than see objectivity and subjectivity as ‘either/or’ categories, he argues they are part of a:

Continuum – a line with ‘pure objectivity’ at one extreme and ‘pure subjectivity’ at the other. Thus, although sociological research is *more* value-laden than natural scientific research, this doesn’t automatically render it unreliable and invalid, for two main reasons. First, ‘pure objectivity’ is an *ideal* which some scientists aspire to but can never attain because *all* research involves some degree of value-commitment. Second, if sociologists recognise how values impact on their work (by, as we’ve suggested, identifying the assumptions involved), this research is less value-laden, more reliable and valid than, for example, the opinions of the ‘person in the street’.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: A continuum can be used to (crudely) represent different political ideologies (from ‘left wing’ to ‘right wing’).

From the above, we can note a couple of ideas:

Empathy: Rather than seeing the ‘ability to identify with the feelings of others to see events from their viewpoint’ as something to *avoid*, sociologists should take advantage of the fact that they have something in common with their object of study (social behaviour) by using such knowledge to inform their research. **Murphy** (1988) argues that if we get rid of the ‘objective/subjective’ *binary opposition* and recognise that how we *see* something (in terms of our values) can’t be separated from how we *interpret* what we see, we arrive at a more coherent understanding of human behaviour. From this position:

‘**Value freedom** may pervert data, rather than assure sociologists access to truth’ since it’s (unattainable) pursuit stops the researcher *questioning* how and why their values are part of the research process. Sociologists should, according to **Murphy** ‘... strive to understand the value base of data, rather than searching for ways to purge values from research’.

Interpretations

Facts: In the pursuit of ‘objective knowledge’, facts are given a *special status* as things that are true regardless of whether we want or believe them to be true. From a *subjectivist* position, if social facts are not ‘things waiting to be discovered’, but rather ‘interpretations waiting to be made’, it follows, as **Murphy** suggests, that the objective of social research should not be to follow a natural scientific methodology (*positivism* or *realism*) with the (unattainable) goal of producing ‘objective knowledge’ about behaviour that is inherently subjective; rather, it should be

‘... to capture the social meaning of facts’ – something that can be achieved using research methods that encourage ‘communicative competence’. In this respect, **Francis** and **Hestler** (2004) suggest sociological research should focus on understanding and explaining the social processes involved in the construction of what people believe – or don’t believe – to be factual information.



Weeding the path

We can note a number of evaluative points relating to subjectivism in terms of:

Relativism: Subjectivist arguments tread a fine line between the idea that ‘all knowledge is relative’ and ‘all knowledge is relative to all other knowledge’. In other words, the first position holds there is no objective way of distinguishing between competing knowledge claims (sociological knowledge has as much – or as little – validity as the opinions of anyone else), whereas the second suggests some forms of knowledge may have greater reliability and validity than others.

Objectivity: Where *ethnographic* research methods (such as participant observation) are used we can never know whether a researcher ‘observed what they claimed to see’; in other words, their *validity* rests on *trust* (and their *reliability* is invariably low because such methods can never be exactly repeated).

Science: From an objectivist viewpoint, a major criticism of subjectivism is that it misrepresents the nature of a scientific methodology. **Popper** (1966) argues that objectivity should be considered *not* at ‘the level of individual researchers’, but at the ‘communal level of critical reflection, argument and assessment’. This suggests

that *reliable* and *valid* knowledge is something more than a ‘simple social construction’ in the sense that it is not merely the result of a ‘consensus of the crowd’ (valid knowledge is whatever people believe it to be) for two reasons: people may be coerced or tricked into believing something and, more significantly perhaps, scientific knowledge is the product of repeated critical testing.

Trochim (2002) further suggests it’s possible to argue that a ‘scientific consensus’ about the status of knowledge is based on the idea of a ‘natural selection theory’ that argues that ‘... ideas have “survival value” and knowledge evolves through a process of variation, selection and retention. These have adaptive value and are probably as close as our species can come to being objective and understanding reality’.

New Right

A couple of broader criticisms of ‘subjectivism’, from a *New Right* perspective, come from:

Moore (1993), who suggests: ‘It is unlikely many people have ever taken subjectivism completely seriously as far as their own personal lives are concerned, because a consistent subjectivist would not survive very long in the real world.’

Marsland (1995), meanwhile, is highly critical of *postmodern* approaches (or ‘fashionable gibberish’ as he calls them): ‘This French pseudo-philosophy has been stirred in with the absurd fantasies of German socialism to render sociology almost entirely immune to the careful, commonsensical sifting of evidence which is fundamental to the traditional British approach to the advance of knowledge. Now anything, or almost anything, goes.’

Moving on

The work we've done so far suggests the relationship between value-freedom, objectivity and subjectivity is a complex one, operating on a number of levels – from a researcher's personal beliefs (and how they might influence the research process) at one extreme, to questions of how we should view the social world (as an object to be studied or a subject to be created) at the other. Although these issues and debates may, at times, appear to be somewhat academic, in the final section we're going to look at some of their 'practical applications and implications' in terms of the relationship between sociology and social policy.

5. The relationship between sociology and social policy

This final section explores the various ways theoretical and applied forms of sociology meet in the area of *social policy* – something that initially involves thinking about the way sociologists view the relationship between:

- **social problems**

- **sociological problems** and
- **social policy.**



Preparing the ground: Social and sociological problems

We can begin by thinking about the difference between two types of 'problem':

Social

Social problems, as Stanley (2004) suggests, refer to social behaviour that 'causes public friction and/or private misery' and involves some form of 'public outcry or call for action' to resolve the problem. Carter (2001) further notes that a *social problem* is considered harmful '... according to the beliefs and values of some influential or dominant group in the society', and comes to be defined as a problem '... when it persists over time and is not solved because there are a number of competing proposed solutions on which people do not agree'.

Sociological

Sociological problems: The study of social

WARM-UP: PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS

As a class, identify as many 'social problems' as possible. Once you've done this, identify equivalent examples of sociological problems (we've given you a couple to get you started).

Social problems	Sociological problems
Crime	Why are some forms of behaviour identified as criminal but not others?
Single-parent families	How does poverty affect single-parent family life?
Further examples?	

problems has traditionally involved examining questions such as how and why behaviour comes to be defined as a social problem. In other words, sociologists have rarely been concerned with trying to produce ‘solutions to social problems’; rather, the focus has generally been on understanding how behaviour is constructed as ‘a problem’ in the first place.

An example of this distinction (and relationship) is provided by the concept of ‘disability’. **Adomaitiene** (1999) notes how ‘the disabled’ face a number of *social problems* – discrimination, lack of facilities, unsuitable building environments, and so forth. In addition, ‘the disabled’ are frequently defined, by politicians and the media, for example, as a social problem in themselves. *Sociological problems*, in this respect, relate to understanding the nature of the problems presented by disability – such as why discrimination occurs, or why (and by whom) disability is constructed as a social problem.

Social policy

The previous exercise should have started you thinking about possible relationships between social and sociological problems, and the point where they often meet is:

Social policy: **Calvert and Calvert** (1992) define this as ‘... the main principles under which the government of the day directs economic resources to meet specific social needs’. **Susannah Morris** (2004) develops this by suggesting it involves the government identifying and regulating:

- **social problems** – such as how to deal with terrorism
- **social needs** – such as those of the elderly
- **social conditions** – such as planning regulations.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Wealth, poverty and welfare: Ideas about social policy are explored in greater depth in this module.

In terms of the relationship between sociology and social policy, the former, in the post-Second World War period in the UK, has not had a great deal of:

Direct (explicit) input into social policies. Governments, for example, rarely seek the advice and guidance of sociologists when formulating policies to tackle some perceived social problem or need. There are reasons for this – partly relating to the perception of sociological knowledge (which links back to questions of objectivity and subjectivity and the different levels of reliability and validity these presuppose), and partly relating to the interests and preoccupations of sociologists (as we’ve suggested, sociologists and governments frequently have different views about what constitutes ‘a problem’). However, even if we accept the above characterisation, sociology has made:

Indirect (implicit) contributions to social policy; sociological theories and research have, for example, influenced both the *development* and *direction* of social policy, for a range of reasons:

Sociality: Sociological ways of looking at and explaining social behaviour have helped shape the way people view both human behaviour and the possible causes of that behaviour. For example:

- **Holism** involves the idea that to understand something we need to consider all possible influences and causes (the ‘bigger picture’, if you like). In other

words, when we look at behaviour we are able to see beyond its *immediate causality* to locate it within a wider system of ideas and events (as with subcultural theories of crime, for example).

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Crime and deviance: A central feature of sociological theories in this area is their focus on the social causes of deviance. This places them in direct opposition to individualistic/biological theories of deviant behaviour.

- **Structure and action:** Sociology moves the policy focus away from locating behavioural causes and explanations ‘wholly within the individual’ (by reference to individual psychology or biology) and into a *social context* where membership of social groups (‘sociality’) is a crucial aspect of any behavioural explanation. In policy terms, the recognition that an individual’s *social environment* has an important part to play in explaining their behaviour has helped frame policies such as those associated with current (2006) government ideas about *social inclusion* and *exclusion*.

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Wealth, poverty and welfare: Social inclusion is a good example of how recent social policy in Britain has been partly framed against a background of sociological theories of community (in particular **Etzioni’s** (1993) communitarian ideas and **Putnam’s** (2001) concept of social capital).

Research: Throughout your sociology course you’ve examined different areas of society

(such as family life and education) where social policy has been *informed* by sociological research and evidence on a couple of levels:

- **Direct inputs** involve research into particular areas and concerns, commissioned, for example, by government departments and agencies.
- **Indirect inputs:** Sociological research also serves to highlight particular *social issues*. **Townsend** and **Abel-Smith’s** (1965) work on poverty in the UK in the late 1950s, for example, challenged the accepted wisdom that poverty had been largely eradicated. This ‘policing role’, as it were, draws attention to the need for social policies to address particular areas of public concern.

Further dimensions involve the use of sociological research for:

Testing social policies to evaluate their success in tackling particular social issues. **David Blunkett** (2000), when Secretary of State for Education and Employment, expressed this idea when he noted: ‘We need to be able to rely on ... social scientists to tell us what works and why and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective.’

Comparative purposes when *formulating* social policy. **Stephens** (1999) has compared the UK and Nordic (Scandinavian) welfare models to explore ideas about social inclusion and exclusion that can be used to inform social policy.

Evaluation and monitoring: In the UK the development of social policy is surrounded by a range of competing ideas and explanations relating to areas like the direction, scope, focus and extent of such

policies. At different times – and depending to some extent on prevailing political ideologies – different types of policy are put in place and it's important that their success or failure is monitored and evaluated through research (carried out by a range of social scientists – economists and psychologists, for example, as well as sociologists). One idea sociology brings to the evaluation process is an understanding of both the:

Intended and unintended consequences of social policy. **Stephens**, for example, argues that *intended* consequences of recent developments in the UK welfare model have been to use *means-testing* to 'exclude' the middle classes and target help where it is most needed, and lower direct taxation by moving the middle classes towards *private insurance* welfare provision. However, an *unintended* consequence here, **Stephens** argues, has been to increase feelings of social

exclusion among both the very poor *and* the middle classes by lessening the contact between such groups.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: The idea of manifest (intended) and latent (unintended) functions developed by **Merton** can be applied across a range of Specification areas (education, welfare and deviance, for example) and issues.

A further example – **Tilley and Laycock's** (2002) research into the relationship between CCTV surveillance and 'crime displacement' (the question of whether criminals simply move their activities to areas not covered by cameras) – has shown how sociological research is useful for identifying the ways social policies can be 'fine-tuned'. The issue of CCTV and its role



Growing it yourself: Evaluating research

This exercise focuses on your ability to select, interpret and evaluate sociological research.

In groups no larger than three people, choose a different area of the Specification and:

- 1 Identify three pieces of research that have contributed to the development of social policy within that area (for example, social exclusion in welfare and poverty).
- 2 Each member of the group should choose one piece of research and write:
 - 100 words outlining how it has contributed to our understanding of an issue.
 - 100 words explaining how it has directly or indirectly contributed to social policy on this issue.
 - 50–75 words assessing the contribution the research has made to our understanding of the issue.

At the end of the exercise each individual summary can be photocopied so that every student has access to a range of research examples.

in crime reduction, for example, has been shown to be a complex, three-dimensional one: some forms of crime are *deterred*, some *discovered* and some *displaced*.



Digging deeper: Problems and policies

We can look at the relationship between sociology and social policy in more depth by observing that the distinction we made earlier between *social* problems and *sociological* problems has – in recent times perhaps – been more observed in the breach. This isn't to say sociology has, in the past, ignored social policy – we can, for example, point to a selection of writers over the past 200 years whose work, often highly theoretical and speculative, has nevertheless been focused on practical issues and policies. Examples from classical sociology include:

- **Marx** (1867) and his work on forms of economic and social exploitation in the nineteenth century.
- **Durkheim** (1893) and his analysis of the relationship between anomie and the dysfunctions of crime.

In more recent times we could point to the work of second-wave feminists in highlighting the effects of *patriarchy* on gender relationships (as well as their influence on the development of social policies such as the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts in the 1970s). In addition, we could note:

- **Townsend's** poverty research as instrumental in drawing attention to both the continued existence of poverty and the development of poverty definitions (such as *relative deprivation*) that updated

such definitions in the light of changing cultural circumstances.

- **Becker** (1963) and his work on labelling theory and **Wilkins'** (1964) concept of deviancy amplification, which have also been influential in the development of policies directed at criminal behaviour.

There are more examples we could note, both in *general* terms (criticism of the validity of official crime and employment statistics, for example, has led to the development of measures with greater validity, such as the **British Crime Surveys**) and in *specific* terms, such as **Clarke and Mayhew's** (1980) work on the relationship between crime and the physical environment.

Social and sociological

As the above suggests, there is a frequent meeting point between social problems and sociological problems – which is not too surprising, perhaps, given sociology's focus on the examination and exploration of social relationships. However, sociologists generally tend to be wary of forging *too close* an association between sociological and social problems for a number of reasons:

Objectivity: The term 'social problem' begs the question of to whom social behaviour is 'a problem'. For sociologists to think only in terms of *social* – as opposed to *sociological* – problems poses the risk of *overidentification* with a particular social group, something that impacts on the idea of personal objectivity. A social problem is, by definition, defined as such by a powerful social group. If sociologists simply accept the 'definitions of the powerful' they run the risk of failing to investigate the possible role of such groups in 'creating the problem' in the

first place. In addition, identification with the powerful calls into question the sociologist's:

Role, in the sense that the sociologist effectively becomes an *agent of social control* – a role defined in terms of helping to ensure the smooth, orderly running of society. This, in effect, reduces the study of human behaviour to a narrow, 'problem-based' perspective and raises questions about the:

Scope of sociological research: **Mills** (1959) argued that an 'unimaginative view' of sociology as 'problem solving' reduces its power and scope to 'the accumulation of facts for the purpose of facilitating administrative decisions'.

Sociologists, therefore, need to be constantly aware of both their relationship to powerful (and powerless) social groups and the potential uses to which their research may be put – a position that treads a fine line between:

- **Co-option** into the general social control process, whereby sociological research focuses on finding better, more efficient ways of making people conform to dominant social norms.
- **Marginalisation**, whereby sociological research is seen as largely irrelevant to the lives of the people who are the subject of that research.

Application

Ideas about value-neutrality, objectivity and subjectivity are relevant in this context because they can be applied in ways that allow sociologists to define what **Stanley** (2004) expresses as the idea that 'sociological problems' relate to all forms of behaviour '... be they defined as "normal" or "deviant".' Thus:

- **Value-neutrality** relates to the idea that *all* social behaviour is of interest to sociologists – there are no areas sociologists should not study.
- **Objectivity**, in this context, refers to the idea that sociologists should be able to 'stand apart' from non-sociological behavioural definitions in order to study all aspects of that behaviour (and not just the parts defined as 'problems' by powerful groups).
- **Subjectivity** involves sociologists making conscious, committed choices about what to study and how to study it. For some this involves applying their research efforts to the illumination of what may be defined as 'social problems'; for others effort may be directed towards exploring neglected areas of social behaviour (such as the experiences of differently abled social groups); yet others may simply be interested in exploring the theoretical issues involved in the way social problems are constructed 'as problems'.

Issues

In this respect, **Mills** (1959) considered the focus of sociological research to be:

Public issues rather than public *problems* or, indeed, 'private troubles' (things that affect the lives of individuals, such as being the victim of a crime or becoming unemployed, but which, in the normal course of events, do not have a society-wide impact). We can illustrate these distinctions in terms of how something like *unemployment* takes on a different character depending on whether it's seen as a:

- **Private trouble**, in terms of how it affects the individual and their family.

- **Social problem**, in terms of suggesting ways to modify the individual and social problems created by unemployment (although **Mills** considered the concept of ‘social problem’ on a much grander scale, such as perceived threats to human freedom, for example).
- **Public issue** that looks at all possible aspects of the (sociological) problem, from the impact of unemployment on individual lives, through to the possible structural causes and consequences of large-scale unemployment on a society.

Stanley (2004) argues that this distinction is important because ‘it may affect both the location of blame for social problems in ways which de-politicises the understanding of them, and it may produce inappropriate social policy. The implication here is that not only may people in different social positions perceive different social problems, they may also perceive the “same” social problem in different ways’.

In this respect, the process whereby some forms of behaviour come to be defined as ‘a problem’ is, according to **Jamrozik** and **Nocella** (1998), one that needs to be examined in terms of:

- **causal links** between various social behaviours that, in combination, create social problems
- **social actors** – their motives and motivations in identifying and promoting problems
- **those primarily affected** by the problem – how they view it, for example
- **‘methods of intervention’** intended to resolve the problem.

We’ve started to suggest here that the

relationship between sociology and social policy is a complex one, not just in terms of how official policy-makers view and use sociological research, but also in terms of how sociologists themselves see their research and its potential uses and applications. This does, of course, reflect a basic tension both:

- **between** sociologists and policy-makers, since the two do not necessarily share similar ideas about the purpose of sociological research, and
- **within** sociology, concerning the relationship between research, problems and policy.

On the one hand, sociologists generally want their work to be recognised as a useful contribution to any understanding of social behaviour, but on the other they’re aware of the potential for such research to be used in different ways, for different purposes, by different groups. In this respect, therefore, we can briefly outline how different sociologists have interpreted their general role.

Feminism

Redressing bias: For some, ‘objectivity’ involves thinking clearly about the nature of society, understanding its biases and injustices and researching possible solutions to these questions that can, in some circumstances, be translated into social policy. An example here is feminist sociology, especially from the 1960s onwards. Generally speaking, feminist writers were particularly concerned to address the ‘malestream’ bias in both:

- **Sociology**, where accounts of the lives and experiences of women were either

ignored or interpreted in terms of their relationship to men – the sociology of deviance being a good example.

- **Society** – in the 1970s, for example, feminist research contributed to the development of ‘equal opportunities’ policies (and laws) that sought to redress gender discrimination in the workplace (the Equal Pay Act, for example) and society (the Sex Discrimination Act).

Feminist research, in recent times, has focused on a range of policy issues and practices. In terms of the former, for example, **Pascall** (1997) charts how policy changes in the ‘UK welfare dynamic’ in recent years have resulted in an increasing dependence on ‘women’s unpaid work’ as carers. **Hanmer** and **Statham** (1999) have examined ways that social work can develop ‘... a genuinely woman-centred practice’ by exploring the common ground between female social workers and their clients and the development of non-sexist codes of practice.

Misra (2000) highlights how, in the USA, social policies (including those relating to employment, poverty reduction and reproduction) have been both influenced by ‘women’s activism’ and, perhaps more significantly, *connected* to show how policy in one area of women’s lives (such as the development of ‘family-friendly’ employment policies) relates to policies in another area (such as poverty, where single parents have been largely unable to share in the benefits created by the former). In the UK, **Blackburn** (1995) has noted how ‘... feminist work has been significant in exposing the gendered aspects of the welfare state’.

Addressing disadvantage: Although a significant part of the ‘feminist project’ has

been to identify and address disadvantages experienced specifically by women, other sociologists have pointed to the ways ‘disadvantaged groups’ are either the target for social policies (the ‘social problem’ approach) or politically marginalised.

Becker (1967) argues that value-neutrality over social issues is impossible and sociologists should make a choice about how and why their research is used – to promote the interests of the disadvantaged or to support the activities of the state (although the two positions are not mutually exclusive). One expression of this idea is **Young’s** (1971) application of:

Labelling theory to users of illegal drugs to demonstrate how the policy of labelling deviant behaviour may lead to an increase in the very behaviour official agencies try to resolve.

Ethnicity

Another application is in the perception and explanation of black male underachievement in UK schools, something that’s variously seen as a:

- **Problem** of (and for) British society: **Gillborn** and **Youdell** (2000), for example, suggest *institutionalised racism* is an integral part of the debate.
- **Problem** for black youth and their families: **Sewell** and **Majors** (2001) focus on an ‘anti-school peer-group culture’ being at the root of the problem.
- **Problem** for both: As **Gewirtz** (2004) puts it: ‘Whilst **Sewell** writes about racism in schools, his analysis focuses particularly on the need to tackle an anti-school peer-group culture. Whilst, for **Gillborn**, the solution lies in eradicating racist practices in schools, for **Sewell**, the

solution lies ... in helping boys who are anti-school to change their attitudes and behaviour and in helping them to successfully navigate the mainstream culture.'

A further development we could note is how some sociologists focus on:

Promoting social change: **Tombs** and **Whyte** (2003), for example, argue that sociological research should go 'beyond value-freedom' to adopt a 'partisan objectivity' that involves sociologists 'being answerable to the relatively powerless ... we should neither conduct research exclusively in league with powerful groups, but neither should we communicate our research exclusively to powerful groups'.

Thus, rather than engaging in research to inform social policy, the role of the sociologist is transformed into someone able to empower the powerless by providing the information needed to challenge the interpretations and policies of the powerful. The main difference between this position and that of someone like **Becker** is, according to **Tombs** and **Whyte**, that 'radical sociologists ... take the standpoint of the *underdog* [and] apply it to the study of the *overdogs*'.



Weeding the path

There are a number of points we can make relating to value-committed sociology:

Slumming: **Gouldner** (1973), while generally advocating a *value-committed* approach, suggests the underlying ideology of 'underdog' approaches owes more to the desire of some sociologists to appear 'radical' than to any real sense of identification with 'the poor and the powerless'. **Gouldner**

views this type of 'underdog posturing' as an example of romanticism and the search for the exotic.

The underdog: It's unclear as to who these people are in any society. While interactionist sociology, for example, has portrayed some deviants as 'victims' of social forces and processes, there is – ironically, perhaps – no way of objectively identifying such people. This 'lack of objective focus' can, at times, lead to difficult theoretical positions – in a racist society, for example, 'the underdog' could just as easily be seen to be the perpetrator of racist violence (since they are 'victims of ideological manipulation') as the actual victim of such violence.

Partisan objectivity involves the idea that although the sociologist is committed to a particular political viewpoint, they carry out their research in an 'objective' fashion, but exactly what this involves is unclear: **Tombs** and **Whyte** variously refer to it as involving 'openness, accountability, rigour, and honesty'. In some ways, *partisan objectivity* resembles little more than a reworking of **Weber's** ideas about value-neutrality, which we noted earlier, whereby, according to **Tombs** and **Whyte**, 'researchers recognise, describe and are open about the perspective from which their research commitments, [and] questions ... originate'.

New right

Although these ideas represent general criticisms of a value-committed approach to the relationship between sociology and social policy, a more concentrated attack on 'underdog sociology' has come, in recent times, from a:

New Right perspective that, in its own

way, advocates a form of *partisan objectivity*. For **Marsland** (1994), the starting point for analysis is the idea that, all things considered, British society is by no means as exploitative, unequal, racist and sexist as some forms of sociology suggest. On the contrary, for **Marsland**, we live in a society that, while imperfect, is one where people generally enjoy relatively high levels of income, security and longevity.

Marsland argues that ‘... the last twenty years have seen relatively few sociologists ... apply sociological techniques and insights to the solution of social problems’, and suggests that the task of sociology is to address ‘social problems’ as they are defined and identified by the political consensus in democratic societies. He further argues that at a time when ‘governments are open to influence by empirical social research and argument’, the dominant mood in sociology has been ‘anti-establishment and anti-empirical’.

Rather than engage in irrelevant – as far as the rest of society is concerned – debates over the epistemological status of sociological research, **Marsland** argues that ‘systematic empirical sociological research has a necessary, important, and constructive role to play in relation to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation’. He uses two further arguments to support his claim that a ‘fully engaged’ sociology is one that takes a commitment to social policy (and the empirical research it necessarily involves) seriously:

- **Control agency:** The ‘Project Camelot’ example we noted earlier is, according to **Marsland**, a good example of just how rare the ‘corrupt incorporation of weak sociologists’ as agents of government

actually is – the fact that it’s noted in so many textbooks (including, of course, this one) suggests **Marsland’s** observation is justified.

- **Disengagement:** A sociology that refuses to become involved in social policy, at all levels, is one that effectively leaves the field open to other social sciences (such as psychology) and, more importantly perhaps, *vested-interest groups*. Although sociologists are aware of the practical, methodological and ethical problems and pitfalls of aligning social research to social policy, a *failure to engage* in policy research doesn’t mean it won’t be carried out. If sociologists leave the field open, two things potentially occur:
 - **Marginalisation:** Sociology is pushed towards the political margins by disciplines, such as psychology, history and economics, willing and able to engage in social research that, in effect, promotes their particular view on social behaviour.
 - **Vested interests:** Policy-making is less well informed and not subject to checks and balances, leaving it open to co-option by powerful groups, able to impose their ideas and opinions – unsupported and unchecked by objective research.

Complexity

The above suggests the relationship between sociology and social policy is not an easy one to define, and the situation is further complicated by the existence of various theoretical positions relating to the different ways sociologists see both the purpose of social policy and their particular value-

orientation towards the conceptualisation of social behaviour in terms of ‘problems’ or ‘issues’. This situation is rendered more complex by disagreements over what, exactly, constitutes social policy and how it can be defined. To complete this section, therefore, we can note a couple of further ideas about how social policy can be defined and, by extension, possible roles for the sociologist in the formulation and creation of policy.

Definitions: **Susannah Morris** (2004) suggests ‘social policy problems are constructed from a mixture of economic, social and political circumstances’ – an idea that reflects **Marshall’s** (1950) classic argument that social policy involves ‘the use of political power to supersede, supplant, supplement, or modify operations of the economic system in order to achieve results which the economic system would not achieve on its own’.

These ideas, therefore, point towards thinking about social policy as reflecting a political desire (or need) to correct ‘social problems’, mainly defined at the level of economic relationships. Unequal economic relationships impact on a wide range of political and cultural behaviours, from relationships within the family and the education system, to questions of crime, welfare and poverty, for example.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: **Davis** (2000) draws our attention to the way the above types of definition ‘... attempt to understand the dynamic relationship between social policies and social stratification’. In this respect, UK social policies have aimed not only at limiting the effects of economic inequality, but also at ways of limiting social exclusion.

Scope: Although social policy potentially covers a wide range of ideas, we can narrow the focus to manageable proportions by adopting **Davis’** (2000) formulation that social policy needs to be considered in terms of:

- **Intentional actions**, originating within or focused on the public sphere and designed to achieve:
- **Welfare goals**, in the sense of involving some ‘positive conception of human well-being’ (which itself can be interpreted widely to include ideas like equality of opportunity, social justice and social inclusion). These goals are put into practice through:
- **Policy instruments**, involving a variety of programmes aimed at areas such as family life, the workplace, education, poverty, and so forth.



Growing it yourself: Sociology and social policy

A useful revision (and synoptic) exercise is to identify areas of social policy in your A level course and relate them to sociological research.

Susannah Morris (2004) has suggested a number of areas where sociological research has, in the recent past, provided an input into social policy formulation. These include:

- wealth distribution and redistribution
- living standards (in relation to the elderly and the sick)
- social disadvantage (involving help for the unemployed, the poor and single parents)
- safety net (the idea of government ensuring a minimum standard of living)
- social inclusion (in terms of family life, education, religion, and so forth)
- social exclusion (as above).

In small groups, each should examine any *one* of the above areas and:

- Identify social policies relating to this area.
- Identify at least *two pieces of sociological research* you believe have contributed to the development of social policy in that area.

Each group should then, in turn, outline their findings to the class.

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