

Chapter 1: The sociological perspective

Learning objectives

The objectives of this chapter involve understanding:

- the origins of sociology as a reasoned and rigorous study of social life
- sociology as the scientific study of social behaviour
- the uses of sociological knowledge; the role of values in sociology
- the meaning of science and different sociological approaches, positivist and interpretivist, to generating knowledge about the social world
- the difference between social and sociological problems
- the relationship between sociology and social policy
- the diversity of people's behaviour within and between societies
- different sociological explanations of social order, social control and social change.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the idea of sociology as the study of social order, from its origins in the works of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber to modern, often competing, sociological perspectives. These writers take as their starting point different conceptions of the relationship between the individual and society. The chapter also introduces ideas about cultural similarities and differences

within and across societies. It explores how the research process can broaden our knowledge and understanding of the social world. This section leads to a consideration of the different uses of sociological knowledge, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between sociology and social policy.

Sociology as a reasoned and rigorous study of social life

Sociology is the study of how membership of social groups, from families through schools to workplaces, influences people’s behaviour. Sociologists create factual knowledge about how and why people behave in particular ways. Facts are true, regardless of whether we believe them to be true; opinions, however, may or may not be true. The crucial difference is that factual knowledge is supported by evidence that has been systematically created and tested.

Sociologists are not interested in facts for their own sake. They are interested in how facts are:

- created: how to produce knowledge that is superior to simple opinion
- linked: how one fact connects to another to create an overall picture of ‘social reality’.

This involves developing theories that explain how and why things are connected. We can only explain facts by constructing possible explanations (theories) and then testing those theories against *known* facts.

Origins

The end of the 17th century was notable in Europe for great **cultural** upheavals. At this time, intellectuals and scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) began to question the prevailing view of the world, which was based on religious faith, magical superstition, custom and tradition. This period is called ‘The Enlightenment’ and it marked the first attempt to challenge traditional **beliefs** through reason and science. Enlightenment thinkers believed that scientific knowledge could help society develop from its superstitious past to a reasoned future. Alongside these cultural challenges to the established religious and academic order, the French Revolution (1789) provided a strong political challenge. The monarchy and the aristocracy that ruled one of the most powerful nations in the world were overthrown by republican forces.

A third source of disruption was the economic changes introduced by the Industrial Revolution. These changes included the development of factories and machine-based production processes that began around the middle of the 18th century in Britain and parts of Europe.

Comte

It was against this background of change that the French philosopher and mathematician Auguste Comte (1798–1857) raised the question of how **social order** was created and maintained. Comte argued the case for a **scientific method (positivism)** through which the ‘laws of social development’ could be discovered.

KEY TERMS

- Culture:** the ‘way of life’ of a particular group. This is normally defined in terms of material culture, or the objects people produce, and non-material culture – the ideas and beliefs they create.
- Beliefs:** ideas that are accepted as true, whether or not they are supported by evidence.
- Social order:** the behavioural patterns and regularities established by societies that make social action possible.
- Scientific method:** a way of generating knowledge about the world through objective, systematic and controlled research. The hypothetico-deductive model is an example of a scientific method.
- Positivism:** a methodology based on the principle that *it is possible and desirable* to study the social world in broadly the same way that natural scientists study the natural world.

In this respect, Comte (1830) argued that all human societies passed through three stages:

- 1 the theological, where order was based on religious beliefs and controls
- 2 the metaphysical, a ‘transition phase’ characterised by upheaval and disorder, where the old religious order was challenged by the emergence of science

- 3 the positive, where science and reason revealed the nature of the social world and replaced religion as the basis of social order.



Auguste Comte
(1798–1857)

Comte stated that the scientific basis of social order could be revealed through a new science of social development called *La Sociologie* (sociology). Similar 'positivist' principles had been successfully applied in the natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry, to understand development in the natural world.

Marx

Comte adopted a 'consensus' perspective, which stressed that social order was created and maintained through co-operation. However, Comte's contemporary, the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1818–83), had a different perspective on the question of social order. For Marx, order was created and maintained by conflict, not co-operation. He argued that social development had passed through four epochs or time periods:

- primitive communism
- ancient society
- feudal, or pre-industrial society
- capitalist or industrial society.

Each time period was characterised by a different type of economic relationship. In feudal society the relationship was between lord and peasant, while under **capitalism** it

was between owner/employer and non-owner/employee. These relationships were always characterised by conflict because they were based on the domination of one group over another. In capitalist societies, for example, the dominant group was the bourgeoisie – those who owned the means of economic production, such as land, factories and machines. The proletariat, the vast majority, owned nothing but their ability to work (their labour power), which they exchanged for money.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one way people co-operate to create order in your society.

The class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was one of many ideas that Marx introduced that remains significant in sociology today. Marx also believed that social order is maintained through a mixture of force and persuasion. For example, people can be controlled through violence and the threat of imprisonment or even death. People can also be persuaded to behave in an orderly way through, for example, religious teachings that encourage belief in a higher power and an individual's predetermined place in the world.

Another significant idea that flows from class conflict is class inequality. This is the idea that in capitalist societies one small group owns most of the wealth, while the vast majority owns little or nothing. The idea of class inequality re-emerged recently in the various Occupy movements around the world, where the wealth and power of the 'top 1 per cent' was contrasted with that of the 'bottom 99 per cent'. The Occupy movements involved protests against social and economic inequality in countries around the globe, from the USA to China, Mexico and Nigeria, and sought to distribute power and wealth more evenly.

Marx believed that inequality was inextricably linked to stratification – the ranking of different social classes in order of their wealth, power and influence. In this respect, power is a significant sociological concept. For Marx, power came primarily from economic ownership. Those who controlled economic resources were also powerful across all areas of society, from politics to religion to the media.

One strength of Marx's work is the contribution it makes to understanding the role of conflict in bringing about social change. Marx also showed how competition for scarce economic resources can have a significant influence on the way societies are organised. However, Marx has



KEY TERM

Capitalism: an economic system based on the pursuit of private profit. Capitalism's defining relationship is between employer and employee (owner and non-owner).

been criticised for placing too great an emphasis on the role of economic factors in shaping social institutions and the way people behave. Writing primarily about class conflict, Marx fails to recognise the importance of other forms of conflict that may divide a society and lead to social change, such as conflict between religious groups and between the sexes. Marx's ideas can also be seen as 'deterministic'. The behaviour of the individual is explained in terms of the impact of wider social forces and Marx gives little consideration to the idea that the individual might choose to act in ways that are different to those directed by the economic structure of society.

Weber

A third major theorist is the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), who was concerned with **social change** in the form of how societies modernised. For example, **Weberian theory** examined how and why pre-industrial societies based on agricultural production, powerful feudal lords and a relatively powerless peasantry developed into industrial societies based on manufacturing and various forms of political democracy.

4

KEY TERMS

Social change: on a macro level, social change involves a major shift in the political, economic or cultural order (such as the change from feudalism to capitalism or pre-modern to modern society). On a micro level it can refer to everyday changes in political, economic or cultural relationships.

Weberian theory: a sociological perspective, deriving from the work of Max Weber, focused on understanding and explaining social action. Contemporary forms of Weberian sociology are usually expressed as interactionist sociology.

Weber (1905) argued that social development, once started, followed a process of modernisation. Features of this process included:

- industrialisation
- urbanisation
- rationalisation: behaviour and social organisation based on bureaucratic scientific principles.

Weber's theory of social action (1922) stated that social change is the result of individuals and groups acting purposefully. For example, change could be brought about by the behaviour of charismatic leaders, such as Jesus Christ (Christianity) or Mohammad (Islam), who influence others through the strength of their personality. In a wider context, Weber (1905) argued that modernisation in Europe was fuelled by the ideas and principles of the Calvinist (Protestant) religion.

Weber's ideas can be seen as a useful counter to the economic determinism in Marx's work. Whereas Marx felt that social change was driven primarily by economic forces, Weber stated that other factors also contributed. For example, political struggles, ideas and belief systems, demographic changes, and developments in science and forms of government could all have an influence in transforming society. Weber argued that each social change has to be analysed separately in order to identify its causes; he rejected the idea that economic forces are always the most significant factor in social change. Like Marx, Weber saw that conflict is of great importance in understanding how societies are organised and operate. He believed that social class is often a source of conflict – particularly in capitalist societies – but that economic relations are not the *only* source of conflict in society.

Durkheim

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1857–1917) followed in the general consensus tradition established by Comte. Durkheim's ideas remain influential in the theory and practice of sociology to this day, for two reasons.

Firstly, Durkheim argued that societies could only be fully understood in terms of the relationship between their various institutions. These institutions are patterns of shared behaviour that persist over time, such as families, the workplace, religion, education and politics. Understanding the relationship between institutions might, for example, involve looking at how and why the family is connected to the workplace. Durkheim felt that all forms of sociological analysis faced a fundamental problem: understanding what holds a mass of individuals together as a society. His solution was to regard social systems as 'moral entities' – something to which people feel they belong and to which they owe allegiance.

In Durkheim's view, society is an entity that exists in its own right, beyond the ideas, hopes and desires of its individual members. Order is based on common agreement about the things a society, and by extension every individual in that society, thinks are important. (Later functionalist sociologists called this type of agreement '**value consensus**'.) For Durkheim (1895), therefore, societies did not just 'exist'; people had to develop social solidarity, a belief they belonged to a larger group:

KEY TERM

Value consensus: agreement about the things a society, and by extension individuals within that society, thinks are important.

- In pre-modern or **traditional societies**, **mechanical solidarity** prevails: people are bound together by who they *are*, as part of a family or some other kinship group such as a clan.
- In modern societies, **organic solidarity** predominates. People are bound together by what they *do*, such as paid work. This type of solidarity allows the formation of much larger groups than mechanical solidarity. However, organic solidarity is more complicated to create. It requires integrating mechanisms – ways of making people feel they have things in common, such as a shared belief in democracy or pledging allegiance to a flag that symbolises the society to which they belong.



KEY TERMS

Traditional society: type of society in which behaviour is characterised by and based on long-standing customs, habits and traditions.

Mechanical solidarity: type of social solidarity characteristic of pre-industrial/tribal societies, in which people are bound together by who they are rather than what they do.

Organic solidarity: type of social solidarity characteristic of industrial societies, in which people are bound together by what they do.



A Hispanic family pledges allegiance to the US flag. How does this behaviour make people feel they belong to a society?

The second reason for Durkheim's continued influence is his significant contribution to the development of sociology as a science. Durkheim (1895) showed that sociologists could both produce objective knowledge about social behaviour – facts that prove or disprove certain arguments – and explain behaviour as the result of something more than just the psychological choices made by individuals. In this respect, Durkheim (1897) set out the basic principles through which human

behaviour could be scientifically studied. He applied these principles to the study of suicide to demonstrate how suicide had social causes, not simply biological or psychological ones.

For Durkheim, the transition from societies based on mechanical solidarity to those based on organic solidarity represented a major social change. However, his writings lack a clear explanation of why this change occurs and his ideas are based on only a limited amount of historical evidence. Durkheim's ideas also imply that social order comes about mainly through the existence of shared interests and values, which connect the different members of society to one another. Durkheim makes no systematic attempt to examine how social order is maintained in societies where deep conflict exists. Both Marx and Weber recognised that order is often imposed by powerful groups using resources such as the police, the military and various means of ideological control. Ideological control refers to the ability that powerful groups have to shape important ideas and ways of thinking in a society. This can include control over religious ideas, for example. The lack of an adequate theory of power is often cited as one of the major weaknesses in Durkheim's sociology. While his conclusions about suicide helped make a strong case for adopting a scientific approach to the study of society, critics have suggested that the statistical data on which the work was based was unreliable. Some have even argued that this data was wrongly applied by Durkheim. Using statistical data as a basis for sociological research may be more problematic than Durkheim imagined, and this is a view that is linked with the interpretivist perspective that will be considered later in the chapter.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one difference between consensus, conflict or action approaches to understanding how social order is maintained. Also suggest one strength and one limitation of each approach.

ACTIVITY

- 1 *Schools and colleges are institutions that need to integrate a diverse range of individuals. Identify some of the integrating mechanisms schools use to promote a sense of social solidarity. How does this illustrate Durkheim's notion of societies as 'moral entities'?*
- 2 *Working in pairs, identify three ways in which class conflict might be expressed. Also suggests ways in which conflicts between social classes might be resolved.*

Sociology as a science: positivist, interpretivist and postmodernist perspectives

One way in which sociologists try to develop factual information is to adopt a scientific approach to evidence (*data*) collection, testing and analysis. This section outlines three perspectives relating to sociology as a science, but before looking at these perspectives, it is important to understand what we mean by ‘science’ in this context.

Defining science

Science is a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge, one that is factual and objective rather than based on opinion, guesswork or faith. Popper (1934), for example, argues that science ‘involves identifying a problem to study, collecting information about it and offering an explanation for it. All this is done as systematically as possible.’ Science, therefore, is a methodology – a way of producing knowledge that has two main qualities:

- 1 It is reliable. This refers to the idea that it is possible to check the accuracy of a piece of research by repeating (*replicating*) it to see if we get the same, or very similar, results.
- 2 It is valid. Data is only useful if it actually measures or describes what it claims to measure or describe. It is possible to measure the extent of crime using government crime statistics. However, the validity of these statistics may be limited if they only record crimes that are reported to the police because many crimes go unreported.

So, a scientific methodology encompasses certain procedural and ethical rules that should be followed in order to ‘do science’.

Procedural rules

Scientific knowledge is created by following a set of *procedures*, agreed by the scientific community, that govern how data can be collected and analysed. Popper’s (1934) **hypothetico-deductive method** is a standard example of a scientific procedure. A scientific procedure generally begins with a **hypothesis** or research question. This question must be tested or answered by the systematic

collection, presentation and analysis of data. A crucial idea here is that any conclusions drawn from scientific research have not been disproven or shown to be false in the course of testing them against the available evidence. This procedure gives scientific knowledge greater plausibility because it is based on tested facts rather than untested opinions. It also gives this knowledge a crucial quality: the ability to make predictive statements. Scientific knowledge means we can say with a level of certainty that something will happen in the future.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one reason why testing is important for the generation of scientific knowledge.

Ethical rules (a scientific ethos)

To ensure that scientists follow the procedures outlined above, rather than making up their results, Merton (1942) argued that a scientific ethos is required. There must be rules governing the general conditions that research must satisfy in order to both attain and maintain scientific status. Science has to be:

- 1 Universal: knowledge is evaluated using objective, universally agreed, criteria. Personal values play no part in this process and criticism of a scientist’s work should focus on the **falsification** of their conclusions or identifying weaknesses in the research process.



KEY TERM

Falsification: the principle that scientific theories should be framed in such a way that they can be disproved (falsified).

- 2 Communal: scientific knowledge is ‘public knowledge’ that must be freely shared within the scientific community. Scientists must, for example, be able to build on the work done by other scientists. This inspires scientists to develop new ideas based on those of other scientists, causing scientific understanding to advance on a *cumulative* basis. By making their work available for peer review, scientists also accept that scientific knowledge cannot be taken ‘on trust’. Other scientists must be free to replicate their work, which requires detailed knowledge of the original research.
- 3 Disinterested: the main responsibility of the scientist is the pursuit of knowledge. While scientists should be recognised for their achievements and rewarded for their efforts, they should not have a personal stake,



KEY TERMS

Hypothetico-deductive method: positivist research design based on the development and systematic testing of hypotheses.

Hypothesis: statement or question that can be systematically tested.

financial or otherwise, in the outcome of their research. If the researcher was not disinterested, there would be a risk of **researcher bias**, calling the validity of the research into question.

- 4 **Sceptical:** nothing is beyond criticism. The scientific community must continually evaluate knowledge because this questioning process contributes to the development of human understanding. For Merton, this 'sceptical attitude' represented the main way in which scientific knowledge differed from other forms of knowledge, such as religious faith. Science is 'true' only because it has not yet been disproved. Faith, however, is considered by believers to be self-evidently true; it cannot be disproved.

We can develop these general ideas about how sociologists produce scientific knowledge by outlining two different perspectives: positivism and **interpretivism**.

KEY TERMS

Researcher bias: condition in which the presence or behaviour of the researcher introduces uncontrolled variables into the research, making it unreliable or invalid.

Interpretivism: methodology based on the principle that social behaviour can only be understood subjectively, by understanding how people interpret situations and, by so doing, give them meaning. Participant observation is a classic interpretivist method.



How is scientific knowledge different from non-scientific knowledge?

Positivism

Positivism is based on the idea that it is both *possible* and *desirable* to study the social world in broadly the same way that natural scientists study the natural world. Positivist methodology (the rules governing how we should study social behaviour) has a number of features.

Knowledge is created by constructing and testing hypotheses, which are broadly defined as questions to which answers are required. Such questions take the form of a testable relationship between two or more things. A simple example is the question; 'Does poverty cause crime?' Testing is crucial because the objective is to *disprove* a hypothesis ('poverty *does not* cause crime'), because if a hypothesis cannot be falsified, it might be true.

The purpose of science is to discover objective knowledge, so sociologists must be personally objective. The research process must not be influenced by the researcher's values, beliefs, opinions or prejudices. This is the idea of **value-freedom**. To avoid biasing the data-collection process, the scientist should not participate in the behaviour being studied but merely observe it.

KEY TERM

Value-freedom: general principle that the conduct and findings of the research process should not be influenced by the values of the researcher.

In general, the positivist approach involves the ability to quantify (express in numerical/statistical form) and measure behaviour. Therefore, scientific knowledge is:

- factual
- objective
- evidence-based
- testable.

Non-scientific knowledge is based on:

- opinion
- guesswork
- untested assumptions
- faith.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is sometimes called 'anti-positivism' because it involves a different approach to research. Interpretivists argue that different people in different situations understand, or 'interpret', the social world in different ways. As a result, sociologists can only describe reality from the viewpoint of those who create and define it.

Harris (2005a) captures the difference between the two methodologies when he notes that positivists use terms such as 'cause', 'law' or 'fact' to convey the idea that human behaviour is governed by forces that the individual social actor is powerless to resist.

Interpretivists, however, argue that people are different from inanimate objects because they have consciousness – an awareness of both themselves and the world in which they live. The ability to think, reflect and act, rather than simply *react*, makes people very different from inanimate objects. This means that people cannot be studied in the same way we study plants or rocks. The scientific study of living, thinking beings, therefore, requires a more subtle and flexible approach, in which social behaviour is described in terms of the meanings and interpretations people give to behaviour.

Essentially, positivism explains people’s behaviour ‘from without’ (not interacting with the people and behaviour being studied). In contrast, interpretivist explanations are developed ‘from within’ (how people understand the behaviour in which they are involved). Interpretivism suggests that sociologists should take advantage of the human ability to empathise – to ‘take the role of the other’ and experience the world in the way it is experienced by those being researched. For example, to truly understand what it means to be homeless, the researcher should become homeless. This practice allows sociologists to gain a vital insight into why people behave as they do.

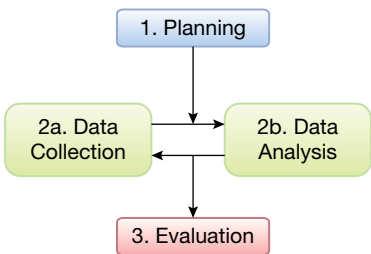
Interpretivists argue that sociology cannot predict the behaviour of conscious human beings in the same way that physics can predict the changes that affect inanimate objects. Interpretivism states that the behavioural rules in a society are determined by context – they change depending on the situation in which people find themselves. For example, if a teacher tells a student to ‘be quiet’, the student’s response will vary depending on whether the instruction was given in the classroom or in the street. How people react to the behaviour of others depends, therefore, on their understanding of the social context in which that behaviour takes place.

Interpretivism focuses on the collection of qualitative data – information that tells the researcher something about the experiences and feelings of the people being studied. Qualitative research is less reliable than its quantitative counterpart, because it is impossible to replicate accurately. However, it has potentially much greater validity because it can reveal much more about how and why people live their lives in particular ways.

For these reasons, interpretivist research follows a different set of methodological rules than positivist research. It uses what Oberg (1999) characterises as an ‘emergent research design’ built around four ideas.

- 1 Planning: a research issue is identified and a ‘research question’ takes shape.
- 2a Data collection: this research design is non-linear; it does not begin with a hypothesis and end with confirmation or rejection. The researcher is not looking for definitive answers, so a research question is explored from different perspectives, such as those of the people being researched or of the researcher themselves. If, as Firestone (1987) suggests, ‘reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation’, the researcher must use a research design that offers the greatest opportunities to capture this ‘subjective sense of reality’.

Where positivist research is ‘goal-based’ – the objective being to test whether a hypothesis is true or false – Lindauer (2005) argues that interpretivist research is ‘goal-free’. The researcher can explore whatever they or the people they are studying feel is important or interesting. In this respect, interpretivist research is emergent: it ‘takes shape as data collection and analysis proceed’. Positivist research design is rigid, strong and directs the researcher through every stage of the process. In contrast, the exploratory framework is flexible, weak and bends to take account of new research ideas and developments.



Emergent (exploratory) research model

- 2b Data analysis: while attempts may be made to categorise data or sort it into a logical, descriptive story (*narrative*), Schultz et al. (1996) argue that data analysis actually takes place *throughout* the research process, rather than *after* data has been collected. This involves a ‘feedback loop’, where the analysis of collected data is used to inform *further* data collection, which in turn informs *further* analysis. Where there is no requirement to collect data to test a hypothesis, analysis is both descriptive and seen from the viewpoint of both researcher and researched.
- 3 Evaluation: where positivist research involves the researcher making judgements about what data to collect and drawing conclusions about whether a

hypothesis is true or false, interpretivist research is generally non-judgemental. The reader is left to draw their own conclusions. As Firestone (1987) suggests, the main objective is to 'help the reader understand' how people see their world and situation, or, as Schwandt (2002) puts it, social research involves not so much a 'problem to be solved ... as a dilemma or mystery that requires interpretation and self-understanding'.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify two differences between positivist and interpretivist approaches. Also suggest one strength and one limitation of each approach.

Postmodernism

Both positivists and interpretivists believe that it is possible to collect objective data and, by so doing, to make reliable and valid statements about behaviour. **Postmodernism** is slightly different in that it is not a scientific methodology. As Usher and Edwards (1994) argue, it is 'a different way of seeing and working, rather than a fixed body of ideas, a clearly worked out position or a set of critical methods and techniques'. Postmodernism is a critical worldview based on the idea that people construct stories (*narratives*) through which to make sense of the world. These personal narratives are neither true nor false; they simply *are* and can, of course, be revealed by sociological research. However, of greater interest here is the associated concept of metanarratives – the 'big stories' a society constructs to explain something about the nature of the world. Examples of metanarratives include religions (such as Buddhism or Islam), political philosophies (such as socialism or conservatism), nationalities (Pakistani, Mauritian or Nigerian for example) and science.

KEY TERM

Postmodernism: microsociological perspective that rejects the modernist claim that the social world can be understood rationally and empirically. Focus is on understanding how people construct personal narratives (stories), through which they make sense of the world.

At different times and in different societies, different metanarratives explaining 'how the world works' come to the fore. In pre-industrial (or pre-modern) societies,

religion is the dominant metanarrative. In industrial (or modern) societies, science is increasingly prominent as it challenges, and in some respects replaces, religious explanations of the world. Postmodern societies (those that develop 'after modern societies'), however, are characterised by what Lyotard (1979) calls an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. For a variety of reasons, people stop regarding these 'big stories' as believable or sustainable.

It is important to note that postmodernism is not 'anti-science'; rather, it argues that the significance of metanarratives is not whether they are true or false, but how people view them. From this position, postmodernism examines 'science as metanarrative' – as a worldview struggling to establish its leadership (*hegemony*) over other metanarratives. Accordingly, postmodernism suggests a range of practical and theoretical criticisms.

Theoretical criticisms focus on ideas such as **objectivity**. For example, Polyani (1958) argues that 'all observation is theory-dependent'. What he means is that to understand what we are seeing, we must already know what it is. To observe a table we must already have a theory that describes what it looks like. This casts doubt on positivist versions of science, in which theoretical explanations are *produced* by observations tested during the research process. Postmodernism also questions positivist conceptions of social reality as something waiting to be discovered (just as something like electricity or gravity existed before science discovered it). Postmodernism, like interpretivism, argues that knowledge about the social world is actively created by people going about their daily lives; the world cannot exist independently of their activities.

KEY TERM

Objectivity: freedom from personal or institutional bias.

Postmodernists do, however, include interpretivism in this criticism. Interpretivists claim to actively *create* knowledge rather than merely revealing its existence. This follows because according to postmodernists, it is impossible to study people in small groups without changing their behaviour in some way. The act of 'doing research' – whether it involves asking people questions (positivism) or participating in the behaviour being researched (interpretivism) – changes that behaviour.



Does participating in the behaviour you are studying change that behaviour?

Sociological research is not, therefore, getting at ‘the truth’; it merely presents different *versions* of truth. The only way to decide between them is by making subjective judgements. To decide if one version is superior to another – i.e. that it has a greater claim to ‘truth’ or ‘validity’ – we must measure each version against certain criteria. For example, based on the criteria of ‘objective testing and proof’, science is superior to religion. However, if we change the criteria to ‘faith’, then religion is a superior truth to science. For postmodernists, therefore, concepts such as truth are inherently subjective because they are based on power relationships. Those with the power to define the criteria against which the status of knowledge is measured effectively decide what is true.

Postmodernists have also criticised the association between scientific knowledge and ‘progress’ – the idea that science improves people’s lives. These critics claim that science is not necessarily a dispassionate, objective ‘search for truth’. As Campbell (1996) has suggested, science can also be seen ‘as the vanguard of European exploitation, a discipline run amok, instigators of nuclear and other weapons systems, the handmaiden of big business and the defilers of nature’. These ideas force us to consider the notion of a scientific ethos, with Prelli (1989) questioning the extent to which scientists actually conform to a ‘community of values’. As Martinson et al. (2005) discovered, scientific fraud appears widespread; 33 per cent of 3,200 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’.

ACTIVITY

Postmodernists suggest that people no longer view science and scientists as beneficial bringers of progress. Working in a pair or small group, identify as many positive or negative aspects of science as you can. Use these ideas as a basis for arguing for and against the extent to which you think people see science as a broadly beneficial or broadly harmful enterprise.

The uses of sociological knowledge: the role of values in sociology

The role of values

Earlier in this chapter, we suggested that sociological knowledge differed from other forms of knowledge – from journalism, through personal experience to everyday conversation and thinking – because it deals in facts. To establish sociological knowledge, data is collected and then analysed or tested objectively. In other words, the data collected and presented is ‘value-free’ – it has not been influenced by the values, beliefs or prejudices of the researcher. More correctly, it is value-neutral, since it is not possible to truly ‘act without values’. The best we can do is recognise the various points at which values potentially intrude into the research process and adjust our research strategy to limit or neutralise their effect. It is possible to outline a range of points at which values potentially intrude into the research process.

Research considerations

To carry out research, sociologists have to make certain practical choices. Researchers must choose a topic, and decisions about who or what to study are influenced by their personal values. For example, while Goffman (1961) chose to study inmates in an asylum, Caplan (2006) chose to study changes in food consumption in Tanzania and Chennai in southern India. These values will also determine whether a researcher studies the activities of the powerful – as in Pearce’s (1998) study of corporate criminality in the chemical industry – or the relatively powerless. Davis (1985), for example, studied the social processes involved in becoming a prostitute. In addition, these choices are influenced by personal views about danger and difficulty. For example, powerful people tend