Modernity and Postmodernity

Modernity began roughly around the 1700s and postmodernity around the 1980s.

Features of Modernity and Postmodernity

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Modern Society or Modernity** | **Postmodern Society or Postmodernity** |
| Industrialisation and the use of technology to mass produce goods by manual workers in full time, lifetime employment. | Rapid and continuous introduction of new goods/services with wider consumer choice.Manual work replaced by service economy, e.g. finance. Jobs for life disappear with more flexible working, job changes and part time work. |
| Work and social class are the main form of social division and identity. Identity is formed by social structures, e.g. class, gender, ethnicity. | Media images and consumption are main sources of identity.Identities are fluid, fragmented and people have choice of identities. |
| Culture reflects the class structure with clear distinctions between high and popular culture. | Culture is more diverse and fragmented with people picking and mixing from different cultures. Boundaries between high and popular culture blur. |
| Politics centre around social class interests based on political parties and government. | Politics are more personalised and linked to the diversity of identities.Party politics are displaced by identity politics based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion.New social movements emerge based on personal concerns, e.g. environment.More single issue politics. |
| Nation states, national economies and national identities dominate. | Nation states and national identities are displaced by globalisation. This also replaces national identities. |
| Mass media is one way communication reflecting social reality through terrestrial TV, newspapers and magazines. | Society is dominated by global interactive digital media as well as social media.Media now creates our sense of reality creating **hyperreality**. |
| Traditions etc are displaced by scientific theories as forms of knowledge for understanding the world. | Individuals have lost faith in sociological metanarratives.There is risk, uncertainty and anxiety. |
| Scientific knowledge and scientific and technological progress are forces for good. They enable us to understand and improve society. | Science and technology often cause rather than solve problems.Science is just another metanarrative. |
| Sociology developed to try and understand and explain society as well as to improve it. | Society is changing so constantly and rapidly that there is uncertainty. Societies can no longer be understood through metanarratives, e.g. Marxism.Society is made up of a mass of individuals making individual choices.  |

The Move from Modernity to Postmodernity

The alleged transition from modernity to postmodernity emerged around the 1980s. Postmodernists argued society was changing in such a way that modernist theories were no longer applicable in explaining society.

Postmodernity and Postmodernism

**Uncertainty and the collapse of social structures**

Postmodernists like Bauman argue that society is now in such a state of constant change that it is unpredictable and marked by uncertainty. This is a state known as **liquid modernity**.

Social structures such as the nation state and the family are breaking down, e.g. there is a wide range of types of family structures.

**Globalization**

This means the nation state and national differences are becoming less significant in people’s lives and the world is becoming increasingly interconnected.

People’s lives are influenced by the global framework. This is known as **disembedding** where social relations are no longer linked to local contexts or confined by time and space, e.g. the internet where people may do online shopping regardless of their location or the time.

There is also the growth of global culture, which people draw from to form their identities via the media rather than traditional sources of identity.

Technological changes have enabled globalisation to occur, e.g. travel or the internet. This is known as **time-space compression** where the distances between people in terms of time and distance (space) have been reduced.

Some technological changes have also caused global risks, e.g. greenhouse gases causing global warming.

Economic changes have influenced globalisation too with there now being a global economy and some industries and companies being in multiple countries, e.g. headquarters/research in one country, whilst production is in another.

**Metanarratives**

Because society is now changing so constantly and rapidly, societies can no longer be understood through the application of metanarratives.

There has also been a loss of faith in the rational thought and science as a means of progress. Science and technology often cause rather than solve problems, e.g. climate change.

**Choice, identity and consumption**

Postmodernists believe there are few of the limitations on people identified by structuralists and that social structures have fragmented or weakened.

Lyotard suggests postmodern societies are characterised by growing individualism with few social bonds between individuals. Baudrillard called this **the end of the social**.

In a media saturated consumer culture individuals are free to pick and mix identities from a limitless range of constantly changing goods and activities.

**Media saturated society**

Baudrillard says life in postmodern societies is **media saturated.**

Media images now dominate and distort the way we see the world. Baudrillard suggests the media present **simulacra**, which are images which appear to reflect events in the real world but have no basis in reality, e.g. the reality of a missile hitting its target is not shown to a viewer but a sanitised version is presented.

Baudrillard calls this distorted view of the world **hyperreality**, which is a view of the world created and defined by the media with the image of an event more real than the reality it is meant to be depicting, e.g. when a character in Coronation Street was sent to prison in the show, there was a media fuelled campaign to free her.

**Pick and mix identities**

Baudrillard sees life in postmodern societies involving pressures to consume with individual identity formed mainly by images from the media.

In a globalised popular culture, which brings different cultural groups into contact, people can pick and mix from a range of identities to create whatever identities they wish.

**You are what you buy**

Bauman argues life in postmodern society resembles a shopping mall where people can stroll around consuming whatever they like and changing identities as they choose.

People buy goods not for their usefulness but as symbols for the image and impression of themselves you wish to project to others.

Criticisms of Postmodernism

**Giddens: late modernity and reflexivity**

Giddens doesn’t dispute the changes in society that postmodernists have identified. However, he says these changes are a continuation of modern society in an intensified form and have brought us into what he calls **late modernity** or **high modernity**, which requires us to adapt, not abandon, traditional sociological theories.

Giddens sees late modernity as characterised by what he calls **social reflexivity.** This means the knowledge we gain from society can affect the way we act in it (very similar to the interpretivists). In late modernity reflexivity is more important as everything is unstable and changing rapidly, therefore people are constantly having to reflect on and reassess what they do and how they do things.

Social reflexivity gives people and institutions a greater capacity to act and plan rationally to change and improve the world. This is a feature of modernity.

**Beck: risk society and reflexive modernity**

Beck is similar to Giddens in that he says we haven’t entered postmodernity but have entered **the second modernity**, which he calls **reflexive modernity.** This is where there are high lives of uncertainty and risk in what he terms **risk society.**

These risks occur in everyday life in institutions such as the family, e.g. rising divorce rates, but also these risks can be seen in the failings of science and technology, e.g. environmental pollution.

Scientific risks are different from natural disasters of the past as many scientific risks are generated by progress itself. These risks have higher chances of spinning out of control, e.g. climate change. These risks are beyond the control of individual nations.

While Beck recognises science causes risks, he also argues it has the capacity to make things better and control these risks. This is a feature of modernity.

Beck agrees with Giddens that we are living in a period of reflexivity as people need to think and reflect more about risks today. People make more individual choices and decisions to manage risks, e.g. recycling, as they don’t trust governments and scientists to do this.

**Harvey and Marxism**

Harvey suggests many of the changes which Postmodernists claim are evidence of postmodernity, can be explained by modernist theories like Marxism. For example, changes like globalisation reflect capitalism opening up new sources of profit.

**Other criticisms**

* Postmodernism is all criticism and since it sees no knowledge as better than any other, it lacks any vision for improving society.
* It overemphasises the influence of the media and tends to assume people are easily manipulated by them.
* It exaggerates the scale of social change, e.g. that popular and high culture are blurred. Cultural tastes are still strongly influenced by traditional sources of identity.
* It is too voluntaristic in that it assumes that all individuals are free to act as they wish and can change identities easily. It ignores other factors that limit these choices.
* Postmodernism itself is a metanarrative which Postmodernists themselves criticise.

Theories on Research Methods

There are two main theoretical/methodological approaches to the study of society. These are positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism

Positivists believe that there are external social forces making up a society’s social structure that cause or mould people’s ideas and actions. These are called social facts.

Positivists believe social institutions influence people’s behaviour with social control making individuals behave in socially approved ways.

Durkheim said the study of sociology should be the study of social facts and that these could, in most cases, be observed and measured quantitatively. The feelings, emotions and motives of individuals cannot be observed or measured and should therefore not be studied. These feelings are the result of social facts such as the influences of socialisation anyway.

Positivists believe that quantitative data needs to be collected for sociology to be seen as a science and for studies to be repeated to check findings, establish the causes of social events or make generalisations.

Positivists use research methods which collect quantitative data. These are more likely to involve large scale research or a macro approach. These methods include:

* Experiments
* The comparative method
* Surveys
* Structured questionnaires
* Formal/structured interviews
* Non participant observation

Interpretivism

Interpretivists believe that, because people’s behaviour is influenced by the interpretations and meanings they give to social situations, the researcher’s task is to gain an understanding of these interpretations and meanings. Sociology should therefore use research methods which provide an understanding from the point of view of individuals and groups who are being studied.

Interpretivists suggest there is a need to discuss and get personally involved with people in order to understand their interpretations and meanings.

Interpretivists therefore favour research methods which collect qualitative data. These include:

* Participant and sometimes non participant observation
* Informal/unstructured interviews
* Open questionnaires
* Personal accounts

These tend to involve a micro approach with small scale, in depth research.

Methodological Pluralism

Most sociologists will use a range of methods to collect different kinds of data.

The use of a variety of methods is known as methodological pluralism.

Sociologists will often use two or more research methods to check the reliability and validity of findings. This is known as triangulation.

Is Sociology a Science?

Science is part of modernity and therefore modernist sociologists’ such as Comte, Durkheim and Marx saw it as of use to sociology. They argued that using scientific methods would enable sociologists to understand society and therefore solve social problems.

**Positivism**

Positivists, such as Comte, Marx and Durkheim believe it is possible and desirable to apply scientific methods to the study of society. Doing this will provide objective knowledge which will provide the basis for solving social problems.

Positivism also views human behaviour is a response to observable external forces in much the same way as events in the natural world. For example, nature is made up of observable facts such as rocks, stars etc. These objects or facts exist outside of the human mind. Similarly, society is an objective, external fact and exists outside of the human mind.

**Social facts**

These external forces are known as **social facts.** Positivists believe these are external to individuals and influence their behaviour, e.g. social institutions, traditions

Durkheim said the aim of sociology should be the study of these social facts and that these could be observed and measured quantitatively, e.g. social classes are social facts and have measurable differences between them such as income and crime rates.

These social facts have a reality external to the individual and shape and limit behaviour.

Patterns, Laws and Observation

**Patterns**

Positivists argue there are patterns we can observe in society and these patterns are empirical, which means they can be measured as quantitative data. It is the job of scientists, and therefore, sociologists to measure the patterns they observe in a systematic (and therefore reliable) manner and then to explain them.

Therefore direct observation and the use of quantitative methods of data collection should be used to study society. Only those factors which are observable and measurable should be studied. Feelings etc of individuals cannot be observed and therefore shouldn’t be studied.

**Explaining patterns**

Positivists believe that laws which explain these patterns are discoverable. Just as physicists have discovered laws that explain the patterns we see in nature, e.g. gravity, sociologists can discover laws that explain the patterns we see in society.

The method for discovering these laws is known as **inductive reasoning.** This involves building up data about the world through observation and measurement. This will enable us to see patterns.

**Verificationism**

Once sociologists have collected enough data to see these patterns, they can develop a theory that explains all the data and patterns they have observed.

After more observations have confirmed the theory, we can claim to have a general law which explains the patterns. For example, a scientists may observe that objects, when dropped always fall towards the earth at the same rate. We can then come up with a theory explaining why this is the case (the theory of gravity) and confirm this theory as a law by carrying out more observations. Because inductive reasoning claims it can verify a theory (prove it is true) this is often known as **verificationism.**

**Causes of behaviour**

For positivists, the patterns we observe can all be explained by finding the social facts that cause them. For example, we might explain the pattern of educational failure amongst certain social groups with the social fact of material deprivation.

As a result, positivist argue research should focus on the search for the causes of patterns of behaviour in society. This can then be used to produce laws explaining these patterns which can then be used to produce social policies which tackle social problems. For example, policies tackling educational underachievement.

As a result, positivist aren’t interested in the feelings, meanings or motivations that people have as these don’t influence behaviour, cannot be observed and therefore cannot be measured. Positivists prefer **macro** explanations of social behaviour because this focuses on how social structures and institutions (social facts) influence behaviour.

Objective Research

**Quantitative data**

Like scientists, positivists use quantitative data to uncover patterns of behaviour. This allows them to measure the behaviours they observe and investigate cause and effect relationships.

**Objectivity and value freedom**

Positivists argue researchers should be detached and objective. They should not let their own feelings or values influence their research. The positivists claim scientists operate in this way so sociologists should do too.

Therefore they emphasise using research methods that allow for objectivity and detachment so the researcher cannot influence the data measured, e.g. self completion questionnaires, structured interviews and official statistics. These methods are also reliable and can be checked by other researchers.

Positivism and Suicide

Durkheim used quantitative data from official statistics to observe patterns in the suicide rate. He found that rates for Protestants were higher than for Catholics. He therefore concluded that this pattern was a social fact and must be caused by other social facts.

According to Durkheim, these social facts were the levels of integration and regulation. For example, he claimed Catholics were less likely than Protestants to commit suicide because Catholicism was more successful in integrating individuals.

Therefore, Durkheim claims he had discovered a law that different levels of integration and regulation produce the pattern he observed, which was differences in the rates of suicide.

**Interpretivism**

Interpretivists reject positivism’s claim that scientific methods can be used to study human behaviour in society. Many of the points made by the interpretivists rely on the argument that the subject matter of sociology and science is different.

**The Subject Matter of Sociology**

Interpretivists argue there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of science and that of sociology:

* Science studies objects, substances etc. These have no consciousness and no choice about their behaviour. Therefore the way they behave is a result of external forces.
* Sociology studies people. People have consciousness and therefore try to understand their world and have choice about how to behave. Therefore the way they behave is the result of internal forces (meanings, motivations, feelings etc).

The following points also indicate there are important differences between science and sociology:

* *The problem of prediction:* human beings might behave differently in an experiment, knowing they are being observed. People have free will and might react differently to the same circumstances on different occasions.
* *Artificiality:* sociology wants to study society in its normal state, not the in the artificial conditions of a laboratory experiment.
* *Ethical issues:* human beings might object to being studied.
* *Hawthorne effect:* sociologists studying people may change the behaviour of those being studied, simply by being present.
* *Validity:* people may distort the truth, not cooperate etc. This may lead to invalid evidence.
* *Empirical observation:* not all social phenomena are observable etc, e.g. meanings and motives people have for their behaviour.

**The importance of meanings and motives**

Therefore we can only understand people’s behaviour by interpreting the meanings and motivations that cause them to behave in the way they do. These meanings are unobservable and therefore mean sociology is not a science as we are not trying to find out laws of cause and effect.

Mead argued human beings interpret the meaning of an external stimulus and then choose how to respond. For example, when seeing a red light, a motorist needs to interpret it to mean ‘stop’. But they can still choose whether to obey the signal or not. How they act will depend on the meaning they give to the situation. For example, they may choose to not obey the signal because they are trying to escape from the police, or because they are trying to avoid an accident. This means people’s behaviour doesn’t always have the same cause.

**Verstehen and qualitative research**

To discover the meanings people give to their actions we need to see the world from their viewpoint. This means abandoning objectivity and detachment and instead putting ourselves in the position of the people being studied in order to provide us with **verstehen** (or empathy) to understand their meanings.

For this reason, interpretivists prefer using qualitative methods such as participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents. These produce data which is high in validity.

Types of Interpretivism

Whilst all interpretivists believe we need to understand the meanings of individuals which influence their behaviour, they are divided over whether this can be combined with positivist cause and effect explanations of human behaviour.

**Interactionists**

Believe we can have cause and effect explanations, but reject the idea that we should have a hypothesis before we start our research. Glaser and Strauss argue this risks imposing our own view of what is important rather than taking the viewpoint of the people we are studying.

Therefore they favour **grounded theory**. Instead of starting the research with a hypothesis, our ideas emerge gradually from the observations we make during the research. These observations can then be used to create a theory explaining what we have observed.

This means they accept part of the positivists argument, which is that behaviour can be explained with theory (or laws as the positivists call them).

**Ethnomethodologists**

Completely reject cause and effect explanations of human behaviour. They argue society is not a real thing that exists external to the individual. Therefore it cannot cause behaviour.

Society simply refers to the shared meanings of its members and therefore it only exists in our minds. This means cause and effect relationships cannot be discovered because people’s behaviour is not influenced by external causes.

Interpretivism and Suicide

Douglas argues to understand suicide, we need to uncover its meanings for those involved.

Douglas also rejects Durkheim’s use of quantitative data like official statistics as these are not objective facts but are social constructions. These statistics simply reflect the way coroners label certain deaths as suicides. Instead we should use case studies (qualitative data) to understand how the meanings of suicide for the people involved.

**Postmodernism**

Postmodernists argue against the idea of sociology being a science. This is because they see science as simply another metanarrative. Science’s account of how the world works is no more valid than any other.

A scientific sociology is even less desirable because according to the postmodernists there are many different points of view in society. However, a scientific approach is dangerous because it claims a monopoly of the truth and therefore excludes other points of view. This means a scientific sociology could be false and a form of domination because it claims to be more true than other points of view.

**Feminism**

Feminists argue quantitative scientific methods favoured by the positivists are oppressive because they involve power relationships between the researcher and participant.

For example, in a structured interview the researcher decides what questions to ask and in what order. This means female participants don’t have power to express their feelings and experiences and quantitative scientific methods in sociology are therefore patriarchal.

What is Science?

Sociology as a whole is often seen as inferior to the natural sciences. However, there are problems with this comparison:

* It is based on mistaken assumptions about what natural science and the scientific method are really like.
* It ignores the way scientific knowledge is socially constructed.

The following points look at how science might be different to the way the positivists view it. This therefore has implications for whether sociology is a science.

Popper

**The problem with induction and verificationism**

Popper argues we cannot observe something repeatedly and then propose a law explaining what we see. This is because there is always the possibility of an exception to the law.

For example, we may observe a number of swans, all of which are white. We may then propose the law that all swans are white which can then be backed up by further observations. However, this law cannot be proven true as one observation of a black swan can prove it false.

**Falsification**

In Popper’s view, science is a unique form of knowledge because of falsificationism. This is the opposite of verificationism: a scientific statement can be falsified (proven wrong).

For Popper, all knowledge can be proven wrong at any moment. A good theory, therefore, is not one that can be proven right but one that can withstand multiple attempts to prove it wrong.

This is a key feature of science as scientific knowledge is open to criticism by other scientists.

**Implications for sociology**

Popper argues much of sociology is unscientific because it cannot be tested to see if it is false. For example, Marxism claims there will be a proletarian revolution but this hasn’t happened yet because of false class consciousness. This prediction cannot be falsified. If there is a revolution Marxism is correct. If there isn’t a revolution, Marxism is still correct.

However, sociology can be scientific if it uses hypotheses that can be falsified. For example, Ford produced the hypothesis that comprehensive schooling would produce mixing of students from other social classes. This can be tested and proven false.

The Realist View of Science

**Realism** suggests not all phenomena are objects or social facts that can be observed and measured, but there can be underlying, unobservable structures that cause events.

Bhaskar suggests the positivist view is based on an incorrect assumption that the scientific method is based on what can be observed. Many scientific discoveries have not been observed, but worked out from their effects, e.g. the law of gravity. Sociology operates in much the same way. We can’t see structures like social class but we can discover them by their effects.

This means sociology can actually be considered a science if we change the positivist definition of what science is.

**Open and closed systems**

Natural science has an advantage over sociology because it can study events in **closed systems**, when all factors/variables can be controlled by the researcher. However much of the time sociological research takes place in **open systems** where these factors/variables can’t be controlled.

However, very often scientific experiments cannot control every single possible variable and therefore takes place in open systems like sociology.

From a realist perspective, sociology is a science, but the definition of what science is needs to be altered as the positivist definition is incorrect.

The Social Constructionist Approach

The social constructionist view suggests that science is not objective but scientific knowledge is created by the actions and interpretations of scientists themselves as well as being influenced by a range of social factors.

**The influence of paradigms and scientific revolutions**

Kuhn questions whether scientists really do, in practice, attempt to falsify their hypotheses. He argues most scientists work within **paradigms**, which are frameworks of scientific laws, concepts, assumptions etc. They use these to approach the problems they are trying to understand and don’t really question these paradigms.

As a result, the scientific knowledge that scientists gain is influenced by these paradigms, e.g. they influence what they should look for, the methods to follow etc. These paradigms are learnt by scientists during their training. As a result, these paradigms act as blinkers which encourage scientists to try and fit their observations into these paradigms rather than actually attempting to falsify their hypotheses.

Therefore, these paradigms are only challenged when there is enough evidence to suggest they are incorrect. This results in science changing through these **scientific revolutions** not through the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

**Reconstructed logic and logic in use**

There may be a large gap between the methods scientists’ claim they use and those they really do use.

Kaplan suggests scientists write up research using the formal method they are supposed to use. This is called **reconstructed logic.** This way of writing up research is essential for their results to be accepted as good science by the scientific community.However, in practice, the research process is much more unsystematic with steps being made up as scientists go along, which is **logic in use.** Surveys show only 1 in 4 scientists are prepared to provide data for checking by others which suggest there may be something to hide.

One way this may be done is by repeating experiments until the desired result is obtained and then publish it. Evidence suggests only experiments that confirm hypotheses get written up.

**Social influence on scientific research**

There are a range of other factors that contribute to the social construction of scientific knowledge and undermine objectivity and value freedom:

* Values of the researcher.
* The desire of researchers to prove their own hypotheses right.
* Whether the research area is one of current interest.
* Whether the research area is likely to attract financial support.
* The organisation providing funding for the research.
* Pressures to publish research findings.
* The current state of knowledge and the availability of existing data.
* How useful the research is seen, e.g. to companies, other researchers.
* Desire for promotion and career success.
* Time and money available to do research.
* Paradigm of research/theoretical perspective.

All of this suggests the positivists are perhaps exaggerating how objective and value free the natural science model really is.

Value Freedom

**Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is the idea that sociologists are involved in what they are researching and their own values and beliefs will affect the research in some way. It is therefore impossible for them to be completely objective and detached.

This is mainly associated with Feminism and interpretivism who believe it is necessary to have interaction and personal involvement with those being studied.

**Objectivity**

This generally means researchers approach topics with an open mind and with complete detachment from those being researched. The research process and findings remain completely uninfluenced by the personal feelings, values etc of researchers.

This is mainly associated with the positivists.

**Values in Sociology**

There are three main views of sociologists on value freedom:

1. Sociology should be and can be value free.
2. Sociology cannot be value free.
3. Sociology should not be value free, even if it were possible.

The other position comes from the Postmodernists who dismiss this debate as they see all knowledge as relative and value laden.

Sociology should be Value Free

Early positivists such as Durkheim and Comte believed the role of sociology was to discover the truth about how society works. This would enable them to solve social problems and improve society.

Therefore values shouldn’t be part of social research because it was not up to sociologists to decide what was best for society. For example, Marx believed he had found the truth about how society would move from capitalist to communist and this would improve society.

Positivists also think sociology should be value free in order to give it status as a source of impartial information. This can then be used to influence social policy and improve the world.

Behaviour is influenced by social structures and social facts. This exist independently of researchers, and therefore aren’t influenced by the values of the researcher. This means it is possible for research to be value free if it focuses on these social structures/social facts.

Positivists also believed that sociology could be value free so long as it used similar methods to those in the natural sciences. Social facts were measurable according to Durkheim, so using empirical methods meant they could be recorded without being influenced by the researcher.

This is what Marx did in his study of capitalism. Using scientific methods he predicted the inevitability of communism.

Value Free Sociology is Not Possible

Interpretivists argue it is impossible to be value free. They argue that every stage of the research process involves values, e.g. when choosing what topic to study, which methods to use etc.

Also, sociological research does not consist of facts that speak for themselves. Sociologists have to interpret what they record or measure and this means they have a framework for interpreting data which will influence their findings, i.e. their own values will affect their interpretation of data.

Sociologists also have values in the form of assumptions they make about society. Positivists think behaviour is causes by social structures whilst interpretivists believe society is socially constructed by the actions of individuals. These assumptions will affect what they study and how they study it. Therefore values are affecting their research.

The personal values and political views of researchers may influence what they choose to study as well, e.g. Feminists will choose to study female inequality, Marxists will be influenced by their assumptions that there is a class divide, whilst Functionalists assume society is based on consensus.

Weber argues it is inevitable values will intrude into the research process. This can be seen in four ways:

1. *Choosing what to study:* Weber recognised sociologists will choose which social facts to study. This obviously means we choose what to study based on our values, or **value relevance**.
2. *Data collection:* Weber argued sociologists should be as objective as possible when collecting data, e.g. not asking leading questions.
3. *Interpretation of data:* data is interpreted according to a theoretical framework. In Weber’s view our choice of theoretical framework is influencing by our values, e.g. Marxism or positivist. Weber argues sociologists should be open about their values so others can see if there is unconscious bias in the interpretation of data
4. *The sociologist as a citizen:* Weber argues sociologists must take moral responsibility for the effects of their research and not try and avoid taking responsibility by hiding behind words such as value freedom etc. For example, Einstein’s work helped make the atomic bomb possible, but he spoke out against nuclear weapons as a result.

Value Free Sociology is Not Desirable

Gouldner argues value freedom is itself value laden. Having no values is a value. He also argues value freedom is an ideology which helps the career interests of sociologists who will take funding from anyone and sell their research to the highest bidders, and avoid taking any moral responsibility for the uses or consequences of their research. He therefore agrees with Weber on the sociologist as a citizen.

Gouldner argues that pretending to be value free and not taking sides supports the powerful in an unequal society. He argues there should be a clear value commitment in sociology with a commitment to improving the lives of the exploited and oppressed in an unequal society.

Becker argues functionalists and positivists have tended to support the view of powerful groups, e.g. the police. Sociologists should instead take the side of the underdogs and other powerless groups. This is for 2 reasons:

1. Less is known about these groups and they need a voice.
2. This can reveal a part of society which was hidden.

For example, Goffman looked at the point of view of mental patients (a powerless group) who were seen as irrational by psychiatrists (a powerful group). This enables us to see the rationality behind the behaviour of these patients (verstehen).

Committed sociologists include Marxists and feminists.

Postmodernism

Postmodernists adopt a relativist position and say that any perspective is based on values and therefore no perspective can claim to be more accurate than any other. This means all forms of knowledge involve values.

However, this could also be applied to postmodernism too which means we shouldn’t believe what postmodernism is telling us.

Conclusion

Whilst values clearly cannot be kept out of sociology there are three ways we can accept the existence of values in sociology and still produce valid and/or reliable data:

1. *Values can’t be avoided when choosing a topic but values shouldn’t be allowed to enter the research process itself:* Weber argued the topic chosen is bound to reflect what the sociologist thinks is important and also the values of those funding the research. However, after this, sociologists should tackle research with an open mind.
2. *Values should be considered when examining the ethics of the research:* sociologists need to think about any potential harm caused by their research.
3. *Findings should be open to inspection by other researchers:* Weber argued researchers should be open and clear about their own values so any bias, even if unintended, can be checked by others. This may be done by checking the methodology used, repeating the research (e.g. quantitative methods) etc. Some researchers do this by asking participants to read their findings and check it accurately represents what they have said to the researcher. This is known as **respondent validation.** Feminists also argue it is important for a researcher to be open about their values and this is known as **reflexivity.**

Types of Data

There are two main ways of classifiying the data collected by sociologists:

1. Primary or secondary data
2. Quantitative or qualitative data

Primary and Secondary Data

**Primary Data**

This is information collected by sociologists themselves for their own purposes.

Sources of primary data include:

* Surveys (questionnaires/interviews)
* Observation
* Experiments

A big advantage of primary data is that sociologists may be able to gather precisely the information they need. However, it may be very time consuming and costly.

**Secondary Data**

This is information that has been collected by someone else for their own purposes but which another sociologist may use.

Sources of secondary data include:

* Official statistics
* Documents such as letters

Secondary data can be quick and cheap. However, those who product it may not be interested in the same questions as sociologists using it as secondary data and therefore it may not provide the exact information sociologists need.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

**Quantitative Data**

This refers to information in numerical form. An example of quantitative data is official statistics on GCSE pass rates.

**Qualitative Data**

This refers to information in the form of letters. It usually expresses people’s feelings, emotions or motives. An example of qualitative data is what it feels like to get good GCSE results.

The Relationship between Theory and Methods

Different sociologists choose different research methods as a result of their theoretical perspective.

Positivism and Quantitative Data

Positivism mainly use the following quantitative techniques:

* Official statistics.
* Comparative method.
* Controlled laboratory and field experiments.
* Large scale surveys.
* Structured questionnaires.
* Formal/structured interviews.
* Non participant observation.

This is because these methods have one or more of the following features: value free, objective, reliable, representative and/or generalizable.

You need to ensure you can evaluate these methods.

Interpretivism and Qualitative Data

Interpretivists tend to use an **inductive approach** to form theories, rather than the hypothetico-deductive method. This is when theories develop on the basis of evidence that has been collected. This enables ideas to be discovered that may not even be considered under the hypothetico-deductive method. This is otherwise known as **grounded theory.**

Interpretivists mainly use the following qualitative techniques:

* Personal, public and historical documents.
* Unstructured/open-ended questionnaires.
* Informal/unstructured interviews.
* Focus groups/group interviews.
* Case studies.
* Participant and (sometimes) non-participant observation.

This is because these methods enable a researcher to gain verstehen and understand the meanings/motivations of the people they are studying. They are therefore higher in validity.

You need to ensure you can evaluate these methods.

Feminist Methodology

Feminism is concerned with the best methods for studying the experiences of women.

**Feminism and positivism**

Feminists have been critical of much positivist research for the following reasons:

* It ignored/excluded women and issues of concern to women.
* It simply treated women as insignificant extensions of men (research on men was generalised to women).
* It uses malestream methods to research women. Quantitative methods result in differences in power between researchers and female participants. These methods also do not provide women with a voice to explain their experiences.

**Feminism and interpretivism**

Feminists see it as important to develop equal and close relationships with the women being studied. Therefore, verstehen is very important.

This requires the use of more informal open ended methods, e.g. unstructured interviews/questionnaires, focus groups.

These methods will also provide valid, in depth information on women’s lives whilst also encouraging women to open up, which may be important when discussing sensitive areas that may affect women more than men in society, e.g. domestic violence.

An example of this is when Oakley used unstructured, conversational interviews when studying first time motherhood and the experience of becoming a mother in British society.

Some Feminists do argue positivist research methods can be useful. For example, large scale surveys and official statistics can be useful to know the scale of issues faced by women in society. However, it would be important to use other methods to understand how women experience these problems etc, via the use of unstructured interviews etc.

**Feminism and value commitment**

What makes Feminism distinct from positivism and interpretivism is that there is always a clear value commitment behind the research, which is to improve the lives of women.

Other Factors Affecting Methods

In reality most sociologists will use a range of methods to collect different kinds of data. They will use whatever methods seem best suited and most practical.

The use of a variety of methods is known as **methodological pluralism**. Sociologists will also use a range of methods to check the findings of one method with the findings of another. This is known as **triangulation.**

The sociological perspective held by a researcher will affect the methods they use and what topic(s) they study.

However, there are a number of other influences as well:

* Who is funding the research and how they want the findings presented.
* Ease of gaining access to the group being studied.
* Pressure to publish findings.
* Whether the research area is one of current interest or not.
* What is already known about the research area and the amount of secondary data available.
* Ethical issues.
* Personal skills/characteristics of the researcher.
* Time and money available.
* Researchers’ desire for promotion and career success.

The Research Process

Once a sociologist has chosen a topic to study and the method(s) they will use, there are a number of stages they go through before starting their research.

Formulating an Aim or Hypothesis

**A Hypothesis**

Most studies have an aim or a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a possible explanation that can be tested by collecting evidence to prove it true or false.

If a hypothesis turns out to be false, we must discard it. This isn’t a bad thing as it means we have learnt something new and can instead focus on a different cause, for example. We simply formulate a new hypothesis and test it.

The advantage of a hypothesis gives a direction to research in terms of enabling our questions to focus on something.

Positivists like formulating a hypothesis because they seek to discover cause and effect relationships.

**An Aim**

An aim is more general. It identifies what we intend to study and hope to achieve.

The advantage of an aim is that it is more open ended. We are not trying to prove a particular hypothesis; instead we can gather data on anything that appears to be interesting about a situation. This can be very useful at the start of our research when we know very little about the topic.

Interpretivists like a broad aim rather than a hypothesis because they are interested in understanding the meanings of the people they are studying. The task is therefore to find out what these people think is important rather than the researcher’s possible explanations.

Operationalising Concepts

Operationalisation is when we convert concepts, such as social class, into something we can measure. For example if we were looking at the relationship between class and educational achievement, we would need to operationalise social class.

Concepts such as social class are fairly abstract so we need a way of measuring what class each pupil belongs to. Most sociologists would use parental occupation as an indicator of a pupil’s social class. This enables us to measure the social class of the pupils.

We can then write questions that measure the concept we are looking at. For example, we might ask parents what their job is.

A problem can arise when different sociologists operationalise the same concept differently. This can make it difficult to compare the findings of different pieces of research.

Positivists prefer operationalising concepts as they want to test hypotheses. Interpretivists are less concerned with operationalisation as they place more importance on the people they are studying and how they define and understand key concepts.

Pilot Study

Sociologists who use surveys (questionnaires and structured interviews) often carry out a pilot study before their main survey. This involves trying out a draft version of the questionnaire or interview schedule on a small sample.

The basic aim of a pilot study is to identify potential problems, refine or clarify questions and their wording and give interviewers practice. This ensures the actual survey goes as planned.

Samples and Sampling

Sociologists don’t have time to study the entire population of people who their study applies to. Therefore they have to identify a sample of people to study.

A sample is a smaller sub group drawn from the wider group we are interested in. The process of selecting a sample is called sampling.

The basic purpose of sampling is usually to ensure that those people we have chosen to include in the study are representative of the research population.

If our sample is representative we should be able to generalise our findings to the whole research population. This is particularly attractive to positivists who wish to make general statements about the wider social structure.

**The Sampling Frame**

This is a list of all the members of the population we are interested in studying. This may be an electoral register or a telephone book for example.

We then choose our sample from our sampling frame.

**Sampling Techniques**

There are different ways of obtaining a representative sample:

* Random sampling: this is where the sample is selected purely by chance. For example names might be drawn out of a hat. A large enough random sample should reflect the characteristics of the whole research population. However not all random samples are large enough to ensure this happens.
* Systematic sampling: this is where the every nth person in the sampling frame is selected. For example, every 2nd name.
* Stratified random sampling: the researcher breaks down the population in the sampling frame by age, class, gender etc. The sample is then created in the same proportions, e.g. if 20% of the population are under 18, then 20% of the sample also have to be under 18.
* Quote sampling: the population is stratified and then each interviewer is given a quota, for example 20 females and 20 males, which they have to fill with respondents who fit these characteristics.
* Multistage/cluster sampling: selecting a sample in various stages, each time selecting a sample from the previous sample until the final sample of people is selected. For example, in a national survey of school students, you might first take a random sample of schools, then take a random sample of students in those sample schools.

**Non-representative sample**

Sometimes, for both theoretical and practical reasons, researchers may not use representative sampling techniques.

Practical reasons may include:

* The social characteristics of the research population, such as age, gender and class, may not be known.
* It may be impossible to find or create a sampling frame for the particular research population.
* Potential respondents may refuse to participate.

Theoretical reasons may include:

* Interpretivists believe it is more important to obtain valid data and an authentic understanding of the meanings of the people they are studying than to discover general laws of behaviour. Therefore they are less concerned to make generalisations and have less need for representative samples.

Non representative sampling methods include:

* Snowball sampling: this is used when a sampling frame is difficult to obtain or doesn’t exist or when a sample is very difficult to obtain. The researcher may identify one or two people with the characteristics they’re interested in and ask them to introduce them to other people willing to cooperate in the research, and then ask these people to identify others.
* Opportunity sampling/convenience sampling: this involves choosing from individuals who are easiest to access.

Factors Influencing Choice of Topic

Several factors influence a sociologists’ choice of topic to study.

Practical and Ethical Issues

**Access**

Researchers have to think about how easy it is to access the people they are studying.

In open settings, e.g. streets, access may be easier than in closed settings, e.g. hospitals.

Access to closed settings often requires permission from a ‘gatekeeper’ and informed consent needs to be provided.

**Time and Funding**

The time and funding available will influence the scale of the research and the methods used.

Large scale research is often expensive and time consuming.

Government backed research often produces more funding for sociologist which may influence their choice of topic and method as government backed research often favours quantitative data, e.g. the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

**Availability of Existing Data**

This may limit or decide the topic chosen and the method adopted.

**Values and Beliefs of the Researcher**

This will influence whether a researcher thinks certain issues are important and worthy of study.

**Influence on Career and Promotion Prospects**

Sociologists face a constant struggle to get money to fund their research. There is therefore a desire to prove their ideas right. The desire for promotion may influence what topics are seen as useful to research and the choice of methods may be ones which produce speedy results.

Topics that are in focus at the time can influence the choice of topic too.

**Pressure to Publish Findings**

Publising articles and books is very important for university academic sociologists and publishers’ deadlines may affect the choice of method.

**Personal Safety of Researchers**

Researchers may not choose topics or methods that put them at risk.

**Personal Skills and Characteristics of the Researcher**

The skills needed for a particular research method may influence a researcher to not choose this method and use an alternative instead.

**Ethical Issues**

Whether informed consent can be obtained and whether confidentiality and anonymity can be guaranteed may influence the topic and method chosen.

Theoretical Issues

The theoretical/methodological perspective will have effects on what is studied and how.

Positivists will choose to use quantitative methods to study a topic which can be studied via quantitative data.

Interpretivists will choose to use qualitative methods to study a topic which can be studied via qualitative data.

The sociological perspective of a researcher will also influence the methods chosen as well as the topics they feel are important and interesting to study.

**Functionalists**

Functionalists are likely to focus on those aspects which show how social institutions contribute to the maintenance of society as a whole and their role in contributing to social stability, e.g. the role of the hidden and formal curriculum in education in reinforcing society’s norms and values.

**Marxists**

Marxists are more likely to emphasise inequality, conflict and division, and to investigate research topics which highlight these areas.

They are also more likely to emphasise class inequality than class or gender.

For example, in education they may focus on how schools reproduce class inequalities and produce an obedient labour force.

**Feminists**

Feminists are concerned with issues of gender inequality. Feminist research might focus in education on how boys and girls are treated differently in schools and how boys and girls are directed into different subject choices and careers.

Longitudinal Studies and Case Studies

Longitudinal Studies

A longitudinal study selects a sample from whom data is collected by repeated surveys at regular intervals over a period of years. Each of these surveys is sometimes referred to as a ‘wave’ or ‘sweep’.

These studies make it possible to study change over time and provide detail on the changes that occur. As long as the sample remains the same, it may be possible to discover the causes of changes by comparing earlier studies with later ones.

**Problems**

It is necessary to select a sample who are available and willing to assist over a long period of time.

It is likely the original sample size will decrease.

Those in the sample are conscious of the fact they are being studied. This may result in the Hawthorne effect.

Most funding agencies are unwilling to take on a commitment over a long period of time.

Case Studies

This involves the intensive study of a single example of whatever it is the sociologist wishes to investigate. They can be carried out using almost any research method, though the more qualitative methods are more common.

Life histories are case studies which usually focus on one individual or one small group. They are most commonly obtained through unstructured interviews backed up with reference to personal documents such as diaries and letters.

Case studies and life histories do not claim to be representative. However, some researchers claim they can make an important contribution to our knowledge about an area and theories, for example, can be tested.

They may be useful in generating new hypotheses which can then be tested by further research.

They enable the researcher to see the world from the point of view of the individual and give more detail and understanding than surveys or quantitative measurements.

**Problems**

They may not be representative.

They may not be reliable or valid. Life histories raise questions about the accuracy of recall of facts and the benefit of hindsight may generate a reinterpretation of the past.

Research Methods: Interviews

There are a number of different types of interviews:

* Structured/formal interviews: these are very similar to a questionnaire. They use an interview schedule where the interviewer asks exactly the same questions, in the same order in the same tone of voice etc.
* Unstructured/informal interviews: these are like a conversation. The interviewer has topics in mind to cover but few, if any, pre-set questions. The interviewer can ask any questions, in any order, with different wording etc. They can ask further questions depending on what the respondent says.
* Semi structured interviews: these have the same questions but the interviewer can ask further questions for more information.
* Group interviews/focus groups: group interviews are when a number of people are interviewed at the same time. Focus groups are a form of group interview that focus on specific topics.

Structured Interviews

**Theoretical**

Feminists see structured interviews as patriarchal. When studying women’s experiences in society, they argue that the researcher, not the female interviewee, is in control. This mirrors women’s subordination in society. Feminists favour unstructured interviews as these give female participants control over the interview process.

The interpretivists argue structured interviews fail to reveal how the interviewee sees their situation.

Positivists like them as they produce quantitative data.

**Reliability**

Easily standardised and repeatable.

**Validity**

Less of a problem with interviewer bias as the interviewer is asking the same questions in the same way to all participants.

However, closed questions restrict interviewees from saying what they wish to say. This means the data may be less of a true picture.

Interviewers have very little freedom to explain or clarify questions. They can also not ask further questions if the respondent says something of interest.

There is no opportunity to gain verstehen.

Because the interviewer is present there is always a risk the interviewer may influence the answers given via body language etc. Equally the social characteristics of the research may influence the answers given by the respondent.

The questions asked reflect what the interviewer thinks is important not the respondent.

**Representativeness**

Whilst the numbers of people who can be interviewed are lower than for questionnaires, a lot of people can still be surveyed and interviews generally have a higher response rate.

However, those who are willing to be interviewed may not be representative of the research population.

**Ethical**

Not suitable for highly sensitive topics as there is no opportunity to establish a rapport with the interviewee.

**Practical**

Training interviewers is fairly easy and cheap as they only need to follow instructions. However, this is still more expensive than for questionnaires.

Unstructured Interviews

**Theoretical**

Preferred by interpretivists as they are higher in validity and enable a researcher to gain verstehen, whilst enabling respondents to give answers that reflect their experiences.

Positivists dislike them though as they are less reliable as they are difficult to repeat and standardise. This means results cannot be compared. Results are also not quantifiable.

**Reliability**

Not standardised. Each interview is unique as interviewers are free to ask different questions in each case if they feel it is relevant to do so. This makes them very difficult to replicate. It cannot be guaranteed that another researcher will ask the same follow up questions.

**Validity**

High in validity as the researcher can gain verstehen. This means the interviewee may be more at ease and open up more than in a structured interview.

The interviewee can talk about the things they think are important. Therefore unstructured interviews are more likely to provide a true picture.

Interviewees can ask for a question to be explained if they don’t understand it whilst interviewers can check a respondent’s answer or ask for further clarification.

However, because there is interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, some sociologists argue this can result in interviewer bias where an interviewer may ask leading questions.

In addition, in a face to face situation social desirability may be more of a factor in a respondent’s answers.

There are also status differences to consider. The interviewer may have more status than the respondent and this may result in the respondent giving answers they think the interviewer wants to hear.

The social characteristics of an interviewer may also influence a respondent’s answer.

Cultural differences may result in interviewers misunderstanding the meanings of the answers given by respondents.

**Representativeness**

Because they are more time consuming, sample sizes tend to be smaller which affects the representativeness of the research.

**Ethical**

Relatively few ethical issues. Informed consent should be gained, as well as anonymity being guaranteed.

The ability to build up a rapport may make it easier to discuss sensitive topics.

**Practical**

Useful for exploring topics which are unfamiliar to the researcher. Structured interviews require researchers to have some knowledge of a topic before researching it whereas unstructured interviews do not.

Time consuming. Each interview can take several hours to complete.

Training is needed to conduct structured interviews. The interviewer needs to have a background in sociology so they can recognise when the interviewee has made a sociologically important point and so they can probe further with an appropriate line of questioning.

Interviewers need good interpersonal skills so they can establish the rapport needed.

*It is important to remember that the interview is a social interaction and therefore the answers a respondent gives in an interview may not be an accurate response to the questions asked, but a response to the social situation in which they are asked. This particularly applies when looking at interviewer bias, social desirability, status differences and cultural differences.*

Improving the Validity of Interviews

Different researchers have tried different ways to improve the validity of interviews and minimise the problems mentioned:

**Becker**

Becker used aggression, disbelief and ‘playing dumb’ as ways of extracting information from the schoolteachers he interviewed that they may not otherwise have revealed about how they classified pupils in terms of the social class and ethnic background.

**Nazroo**

Nazroo tried to ensure that as far as possible, respondents were interviewed by someone from their own ethnic group who spoke the same language. He also ensured the questions were in the language of the respondent.

Research Methods: Observations

There are several different types of observation:

* Non participant observation: the researcher observes the group without taking part.
* Participant observation: the researcher takes part in the everyday life of the group while observing.

There is also:

* Overt observation: the researcher makes it clear to the people they are studying that they are observing them.
* Covert observation: the researcher doesn’t inform the people they are studying that they are observing them.

Conducting a Participant Observation Study

The main issues sociologists face are getting in, staying in and getting out of the group being studied.

**Getting In**

The researcher may adopt an overt role where they declare their true identity to the group or they may adopt a cover role where they conceal their role as a researcher.

The researcher will need to make contact with the group and this may depend on personal skills, having the right connections or even pure chance.

They will also need to gain the trust and acceptance of the group.

**Staying In**

Problems with this involve issues such as the need for extensive note taking which may disrupt the behaviour of the group.

The researcher may also may face problems about how far to involve themselves in the behaviours of the group without losing their trust or the researcher’s objectivity. They may also engage in illegal behaviour in order to remain in the group.

Another danger of staying in the group is that of ‘going native’. This is when the research over identifies with the group and becomes biased. When this happens they have stopped being an objective observer and have simply become a member of the group.

A further problem is that the more time the researcher spends with the group, the less strange its ways come to appear. After a while, the researcher may cease to notice things that would have struck them as unusual at an earlier stage of the research.

**Getting Out**

This involves issues such as leaving the group without damaging relationships, becoming sufficiently detached to write an impartial account and making sure members of the group cannot be identified.

Participant Observation

**Theoretical**

These are preferred by interpretivists as they enable a researcher to gain verstehen and a true picture.

Interactionists also like participant observation as they see society as constructed through face to face interactions of its members and the meanings individuals give to these interactions.

Positivists argue there are problems with the validity and reliability of these observations. For example, there is no real way of checking the findings and the observations are not repeatable. Most of the observations are written down later so they may be inaccurate.

**Reliability**

Very low in reliability. It is very difficult to replicate participant observation and the study will not be standardised.

Because it produces qualitative data it can make comparisons with other studies difficult. Positivists would argue this makes it less reliable.

**Validity**

Observing people obtains data that provides a picture of how they really live.

It also provides sociologists with insight and verstehen.

Because it enables a researcher to start without a hypothesis it means the findings are grounded in real life and not influenced by the researcher’s own opinions. This also enables them to discover things that other methods may miss.

It doesn’t take place in an artificial environment.

However, the risk of ‘going native’ makes it difficult to remain objective and may result in bias.

The presence of a researcher may result in the Hawthorne effect.

**Representativeness**

The group studied is usually very small and the sample is often not representative.

**Ethical**

May raise ethical issues, especially if cover observation is used.

The researcher may have to engage in illegal activities to remain part of the group.

**Practical**

May be the only method that can be used for studying certain groups, e.g. criminal groups.

Can be used for studying situations where questioning may be ineffective, for example, when studying how people label other people. It would be pointless to ask people questions about this as they are unaware of their assumptions.

However, it is a very time consuming method.

The researcher needs specialist skills.

It can be very personally stressful and demanding.

Personal characteristics may restrict which groups can be studied.

Some groups have the power to make access difficult.

Non Participant Observation

The main reason for using non participant observation is to reduce the risk that people will be affected by the presence of a researcher.

It may also be used when groups might be unwilling to cooperate in research, although this raises ethical issues.

Non participant observation allows sociologists to observe people in their normal social situations and to avoid the Hawthorne effect. This can only be achieved fully when the observation is carried out without the knowledge of the person/people being observed.

A problem with this method is that it does not allow the researcher to investigate the meanings people attach to the behaviour that is being observed. The data produced may well reflect the interpretations of the researcher which affects the reliability and validity of the data.

Research Methods: Questionnaires

There are two types of questionnaires:

1. Closed questionnaires: respondents must choose from a limited range of possible answers that the researcher has decided in advance. Each possible answer is given a code, enabling researchers to quantify the number of respondents choosing each of the available answers.
2. Open questionnaires: respondents are free to give whatever answer they wish, in their own words, and without any pre selected choices being offered by the researcher.

Questionnaires can either be completed by the respondents themselves (self completion questionnaire) or by giving the information to an interviewer and either face to face or over the telephone.

Questionnaire Design

All respondents need to be presented with the same questions and the questionnaire cannot be changed once the survey has begun. A pilot study is therefore very important. Some of the following are important issues when designing a questionnaire:

* The questionnaire should be as short as possible with clear layout and instructions.
* Clear and neutral language should be used to avoid ‘leading’ questions.
* Those being surveyed should be reassured their answers will be kept confidential or anonymous.

Advantages

**Theoretical**

Positivists like closed questionnaires as they allow researchers to collect quantitative data which is reliable and standardised and can be used to test hypotheses.

**Reliability**

Closed questionnaires are standardised and easily repeatable. The same questionnaire is given to all participants and another researcher can use the same questionnaire with the same choice of answers.

With self completion questionnaires no researcher is present so the social characteristics of the researcher don’t have to be the same if the questionnaire is repeated by a different researcher.

**Validity**

Open questionnaires are more valid as the respondent can express what they really mean. There is less chance of researcher imposition. They are also more detailed than closed questionnaires.

Self completion questionnaires can minimise researcher effect.

**Representativeness**

It is possible to collect information dfrom a large mnumber of people which means the results are more likely to be representative.

**Ethical**

Researchers need to gain informed consent and guarantee anonymity.

They can make it clear that participants don’t have to answer any questions they don’t want to answer.

**Practical**

Quick and cheap.

No need for interviewers or observers to be trained.

Disadvantages

**Theoretical**

Intepretivists argue data from questionnaires lacks validity and that we can only gain a valid picture by using methods that allow us to gain verstehen. They argue questionnaires are too detached for this.

**Reliability**

For self completion questionnaires it is not possible to ensure that all respondents completed the questionnaire in the same way and under the same conditions. This makes it less standardised and repeatable.

**Validity**

Questionnaires are snapshots. They give a picture of society at one moment in time and therefgore do not capture the way peropl’s attitudes and behaviour change.

The meaning of some questions may be unclear to some participants and these cannot be explained or rewritten. This may result in respondents giving inaccurate responses.

Social desirability can be a problem.

With closed questionnaires researcher imposition may be a problem. The researcher has chosen the answer options so they have limited the answers respondents can give. As a result the answer given by a respondent may not be a true picture. The answer options may say more about what the researcher thinks than the respondent.

With self completion questionnaires the researcher is not present to prompt replies or explain questions.

With open questionnaires it may be difficult to classify and quantify the results. The meaning of the answers may sometimes be unclear to the researcher for example.

If an interesting point is made in a questionnaire, a researcher is not able to follow it up by asking further questions.

**Representativeness**

Questionnaires often have a low response rate.

The people that do return the questionnaires may also not be representative of the population being studied. Equally those with strong views on a subject are more likely to respond. This can all distort the representativeness of questionnaires.

Research Methods: Experiments

There are three types of experiments sociologists use: laboratory experiments, field experiments and the comparative method.

Laboratory Experiments

The researcher will take two groups that are alike in every way: one is the control group and the other is the experimental group.

The researcher will then alter some factor (the independent variable) in the experimental group to see whether the variable being investigated (the dependent variable) changes compared to in the control group.

If nothing changes in the experimental group then that variable can be dismissed as a cause of the thing being investigated and other variables can be tested.

Through this method the researcher can eventually arrive at an explanation for the issue being investigated that has been tested against evidence.

An example might be looking at what causes plants to grow. In the experimental group we might vary the quantity of nutrients that they received, carefully measuring and recording any changes in the plants’ size that we observe, whilst in the control group we would keep everything constant and also measure and record any changes in the size of the plants.

This method enables the researcher to establish a cause and effect relationship.

**Theoretical**

Positivists would like experiments as they are a scientific method that enables them to establish cause and effect relationships.

Interpretivists argue humans are fundamentally different from plants etc which are studied by natural scientists. Unlike these objects we have free will. This means our behaviour cannot be explained in terms of cause and effect. Therefore the experimental method is not an appropriate research method.

**Reliability**

Experiments can be replicated and they are therefore highly reliable. This is because the original researcher can specify precisely what steps were followed so other researchers can repeat these in future. Also it is a very detached method: the researcher’s feelings and opinions have no effect on the conduct or outcome of the experiment.

**Validity**

A laboratory is not a normal or natural environment. It is therefore likely that any behaviour in these conditions is also unnatural or artificial.

If people know they are being studied they may behave differently. For example, they may try to second guess what the researcher wants them to do and act accordingly, or they may try to not exhibit the behaviour they think the researcher is expecting to see. This is known as the Hawthorne effect.

It may be difficult to identify one variable which causes a social issue/behaviour.

**Ethics**

It may be difficult to get the informed consent of groups such as children or people with learning difficulties who may be unable to understand the nature and purpose of the experiment.

Experiments may cause harm, especially to those in the experimental group.

Field Experiments

These are experiments that take place in the real world under normal social conditions but following similar procedures to the laboratory experiment.

They have similar advantages and disadvantages to the laboratory experiment, such as they may involve the researcher misleading the participants.

Field experiments have mainly been carried out by interpretivists.

Comparative Method

This rests on the same principles as the experiment and is an alternative to it. However, instead of setting up artificial experiments, the researcher collects data about social groups in the real world or the same society at different times. The researcher then compares the society or groups with another in an attempt to identify if the differences between them have an effect.

This method is most commonly used by positivists concerned with trying to identify the causes of social events and behaviour.

Secondary Sources

There are two main sources of secondary data: official statistics and documents.

Official Statistics

These are quantitative data gathered by government or other official bodies. The ten yearly Census of the whole UK population is a major source of official statistics. Statistics are used by the government to help with policy making.

There are two ways of collecting official statistics:

1. Registration: for example the law requires parents to register births.
2. Official surveys: such as the Census.

In addition to official statistics produced by the government, organisations and groups such as trade unions produce various kinds of statistics.

**Theoretical**

Positivists see statistics as a valuable resource. Positivists see official statistics as true and objective measures of the real rate of certain issues in society. They develop hypotheses to discover the causes of the behaviour patterns that the statistics reveal and use statistics to test these hypotheses.

Interpretivists see official statistics as lacking validity. They argue they are socially constructed and merely represent the labels some people give to the behaviour of others. Rather than taking statistics at face value therefore, interpretivists argue we should investigate how they are socially constructed.

Marxists see official statistics as serving the interest of capitalism. The statistics the state produces are part of ruling class ideology.

**Reliability**

Official statistics are generally see as reliable. They are compiled in a standardised way by trained staff following set procedures.

However they are not always wholly reliable. For example people coding people’s responses on a survey make errors or omit information when recording data from forms, or people may fill in the forms incorrectly.

**Validity**

We need to distinguise between hard and soft statistics.

Hard statistics, e.g. the number of births, are usually very accurate as only a small number of these go unrecorded.

Soft statistics are often much less valid. For example police statistics do not record all crime.

Some information may not be collected and also statistics collected may be used to support government policies or arguments of other organisations. This may reduce the validity of the statistics as they have been collected to support the arguments of these organisations.

**Representativeness**

Because official statistics often cover very large numbers and because care is taken with sampling procedures, they are often more representative than surveys conducted by sociologists. They may therefore be better for making generalisations.

However some statistics are more representative than others because some, such as statistics on births are likely to cover almost all of the population, whilst others, such as the British Crime Survey, are likely to be based on a sample of the population. Nonetheless these surveys are usually bigger than most sociologists could carry out themselves.

**Ethical Issues**

Official statistics often reduce the number of ethical issues faced by a researcher as they have already been collected by someone else and are often publicly available.

**Practical Issues**

Advantages:

* A free source of large amounts of data. Saves time and money
* Allow comparisons between groups, e.g. statistics on educational achievement or crime can be compared between classes or different genders.
* They are collected at regular intervals and therefore show trends and patterns over time. This means they can be used to show cause and effect relationships.

Disadvantages:

* The government collects statistics for its own purpose so there may be none available for the topic a sociologist is interested in.
* The definitions that the state uses may be different from those that sociologists would use.
* If definitions change over time it may make comparisons difficult.

Documents

This refers to any written text and can also include media output such as from television. This is usually qualitative data.

There are three main types:

1. Public documents: these are produced by organisations such as government departments.
2. Personal documents: these include items such as letters. They are first person accounts of social events and peronsal experiences. They generally include the writer’s feelings and attitudes.
3. Historical documents: these are personal or public documents created in the past.

Interpretivists would like documents, especially personal documents, as they provide insights into the views of the people who produced them. They may also be the only sources of information for an area of research.

Scott argues there are four criteria that should be used for evaluating documents:

1. **Authenticity**

Is the document what it claims to be? Are there any missing page, and if it is a copy, is it free from errors? Who actually wrote the document?

1. **Credibility**

Is the document believeable? Was the author sincere? Is the document accurate or is there bias or exaggeration? Who was the document written for?

1. **Representativeness**

Is the evidence in the document typical of those appearing at the time? Is the evidence complete or merely a partial, biased account?

1. **Meaning**

What do the documents mean? Do they have the same meaning now as they did at the time they were first produced?

Content Analysis

This is a method for dealing systematically with the contents of documents. It is mainly used for analysing documents produced by the media.

Although such documents are usually qualitative, content analysis enables the sociologist to produce quantitative data from these sources.

This is done by sorting out categories and then going through the documents and recording the numbere of times items in each category appear.

**Theoretical**

Positivits see it as a usueful source of quantitative data.

However interpretivists argue that simply counting up the number of times something appears in a document tells us nothing about its meaning.

**Reliability**

It is relatively reliable as it produces quantitative data that other researchers can chec.

However, the categories used may be different depending on different researchers.

**Validity**

There is no involvement with people so no opportunity for researcher effect and it enables the discovery of things which may not have been obvious before the content analysis is carried out.

However, it doesn’t explain reasons and meanings and interpretations may differ from one researcher to the next. A researcher may interpret the document according to their viewpoint.

**Practical**

Relatively cheap and it is usually easy to find sources of material.

The Relationship between Sociology and Social Policy

**Social policy** refers to the packages of plans and actions adopted by national and local government or voluntary agencies to solve social problems.

A **social problem** is something that is seen as being harmful to society in some way that needs collective action to solve it. This is different to a **sociological problem** which is a social or theoretical issue that needs explaining, whether it is a problem or not. For example, the improvement in the achievement of girls in education might need explaining but it isn’t a social problem.

The Contribution of Sociology to Social Policy

There are a number of ways sociology contributes to social policy:

1. **Providing an awareness of cultural differences**

Seeing society from different perspectives and being sensitive to the ways of life etc of others helps policy makers tailor policies more effectively. Examples include research on ethnicity or disability.

1. **Providing self-awareness and understanding**

Sociology develops an understanding of ourselves and why we behave as we do. Reflecting on experiences like racism, discrimination etc can empower people to change their lives, e.g. forming support/pressure groups to challenge existing social policies and demand new ones.

1. **Changing assumptions**

Social research can indirectly influence social policy by being absorbed into the common sense assumptions of society’s dominant culture. This can make government policies seem either acceptable or subjects of ridicule.

1. **Providing a theoretical framework**

Sociology can provide a theoretical framework for policies adopted by governments. Between 1979 and 1992, the Conservative governments were strongly influenced by the New Right ideas of Charles Murray, viewed the welfare state as creating a dependent underclass. This framework resurfaced in the Conservative-led coalition government after 2010.

By contrast, the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 was led for 10 years by a prime minister who was a fan of sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens provided the theoretical basis for social policies based around building social cohesion and social solidarity, e.g. the national minimum wage

Similar theoretical frameworks have been provided by Left and Right Realism which has influenced crime policy.

1. **Providing practical professional knowledge**

Sociologists also work in a wide range of other occupations, e.g. town planning, social work. All of these can provide professional inputs as social policy is formed in a range of areas.

Sociologists are also employed as civil servants in government departments like the Home Office. For example, it was researchers in the Home Office who helped improve the validity of crime statistics by the development of the British Crime Survey. Such researchers are constantly involved in commissioning and carrying out research, as well as briefing the media, MPs and government ministers about the effectiveness of policies.

1. **Identifying social problems**

Sociologists, particularly academics, can identify social problems that arise from more open sociological thinking, than if they were applied in a particular policy area.

Sociological ideas can also help shape policy by showing that social problems have wider structural causes, e.g. poverty and crime.

Feminist sociologists have carried out a lot of research revealing the nature and extent of inequalities and discrimination against women in areas such as pay and employment, and suggesting solutions to them. This has fed into policy changes such as the Sex Discrimination, Equal Pay and Equality Acts.

Research by Townsend as well as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has exposed the extent of poverty in the UK.

1. **Providing the evidence**

This is the most obvious form of input, as sociologists are frequently those who carry out research, analyse the problems, suggest explanations and so on. This provides policy makers with evidence they can use to back up their policies.

1. **Identifying the unintended consequences of policies**

Sociological research can evaluate existing policies to see if they have any unintended consequences, such as the latent functions Merton mentions.

1. **Assessing the results**

Sociological research can help to establish whether policies have worked or whether they need changing/scrapping.

Influences on Social Policy Making

Even when sociologists do conduct research into social problems, there is no guarantee policy makers will study their findings or that any proposed solutions will be implemented. A number of factors affect whether this will happen:

**Complex nature of social problems**

Sociological research rarely provides clear cut explanations and solutions. The complex nature of social problems makes it relatively easy for governments to choose to ignore research or elements of it that do not conform to their ideas.

**Electoral popularity**

Research findings and recommendations might point to a policy which will be unpopular with voters. For example, much evidence suggests prison doesn’t lower crime rates, whilst putting more police officers on the streets often has less impact as well. However, other policies aren’t proposed as more police officers and tougher imprisonment is what works with voters.

**Critical sociology**

Sociologists who are critical of the state and powerful groups, such as Marxists, may be regarded as too extreme and therefore unlikely to influence policy.

**Ideological and policy preferences of governments**

If the researcher’s perspective is similar to the political ideology of the government, they may stand more chance of influencing its policies.

Policy advice to governments is often provided by research institutes (think tanks) which have political leanings, e.g. Demos is generally more sympathetic to the Labour Party whilst Policy Exchange is closer to Conservative Party policies. These think tanks will often provide evidence that supports the political preferences of governments and political parties.

Evidence may be misused or distorted by governments or political parties to support policies they have formulated due to political ideas. Two examples of this are policies on prostitution and cannabis:

1. Prostitution

Davies found the government’s prostitution strategy of 2006 was highly selective in its use of social research in order to bolster support for its own hostile view of prostitution. It ignored, dismissed or misrepresented research that might undermine its policy.

1. Cannabis

In 2008 the government decided to reclassify the legal status of cannabis from a class C drug to a class B drug. It did this despite advice from its own scientific advisors that such a reclassification was not necessary and would not curb cannabis use.

**Funding sources**

Some sociologists may tone down their findings and recommendations to fit in with the wishes of the people funding them. Similarly, policymakers may recruit sociologists who share their political beliefs.

Findings may then be used to justify what policymakers intended to do anyway.

**Interest groups**

These are pressure groups that seek to influence government policies in their own interests. For example, business groups may succeed in persuading the government not to raise the minimum wage, even though this might reduce poverty.

**Globalisation**

International organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may influence the social policies of individual nations. For example, the IMF’s structural adjustment programmes have required less developed countries to introduce fees for education and health care as a condition for aid, despite evidence from research that this makes development less likely.

Government policy making also has to take into account wider global issues, e.g. requirements of membership of the European Union.

**Cost**

Governments may not be able to afford to implement social policies or may have to make cuts which can cause social problems.

**Popularity of sociological ideas**

If sociological ideas become part of mainstream culture it can mean policies related to these are more likely to be implemented.

For example, Bowlby’s view that children’s relationships with their mother are crucial for development is widely accepted by many people. This has influenced policies on day care etc.

Should Sociologists be involved in Policy Research?

There are two broad positions in this discussion:

1. **Sociology should be involved in applied social policy research**

The founders of Sociology such as Comte, Durkheim and Marx, all saw sociology as a means of improving society. Many sociologists have continued this and argue that not making policy recommendations is simply refusing to take any responsibility for their findings. This is the view of many Feminist sociologists, particularly liberal Feminists.

Another reason is the issue of funding. The largest funding agency is the government and other public bodies. The Economic and Social Research Council is an independent government funded body for the promotion of social science research and provides substantial grants to researchers, often linked to policy issues. Other funding bodies do this too. Sociologists who choose not to get involved in applied social research are likely to find themselves short of funds.

Marsland argues for a fully engaged sociology that is committed to social policy. He suggests most sociologists lack commitment to applied policy research and prefer to ‘shout from the sidelines’. Marsland argues sociologists should be fully involved in the policy process and this would provide positive benefits through evidence based policy making.

1. **Sociology should not be involved in applied social policy research**

This relates to the issues of detachment and objectivity and how funding issues can constrain the nature of research.

Funding for research comes from organisations and agencies who will only fund research which meets with their approval. This may mean they need the research to be carried out in a particular way, e.g. quantitative or qualitative data. They may also limit the research. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions research strategy makes it clear there is no scope for open ended, free thinking and research must be linked to policies being implemented.

Marxists and Feminists might prefer non-involvement in policy research to unintentionally providing research which contributes to policies which disadvantage women or the poor.

Sociological research may produce findings which are opposed to the interests of the government or challenge existing policies by highlighting problems with these policies which create, rather than solve, social problems.

There is a risk that too close an involvement in applied research can mean that policy making, which is a political process, becomes the driving force of sociology. This would then make sociology less objective and more of a political extension of the government.

**The postmodernist view**

Postmodernists argue sociology should not be involved in policy research because sociology has no contribution to make to social policy making and the debate whether sociologists should be involved or not is irrelevant. This is because sociology only provides interpretations of the world rather than firm evidence.

They suggest sociology’s role is to contribute to social understanding and tolerance by enabling people to understand more about themselves and others.

Perspectives on Social Policy and Sociology

**Positivism and Functionalism**

Early positivists such as Comte and Durkheim thought sociology would discover both the cause of social problems and scientifically based solutions to them, e.g. Durkheim proposed a meritocratic education system to nurture the idea that society was fair, which would promote social cohesion.

Functionalists see society as based on a value consensus and free from conflict. Functionalists and positivists see the state as serving the interests of society as a whole. They see social policies as helping society run more smoothly and helping society as a whole, e.g. educational policies promote equal opportunity and social integration.

For both functionalists and positivists, the sociologist’s role is to provide the state with objective information for the state to base their policies on.

They prefer policies which are also known as **piecemeal social engineering.** Basically, taking a cautious approach to tackling social problems.

*Criticisms*

Marxists argue piecemeal policies are insufficient to tackle social problems, e.g. equal opportunity educational policies will not be effective because of poverty in society. Instead, the structure of society needs completely changing.

**Social Democrat**

This agrees with the previous criticism of Functionalism. They prefer major redistribution of wealth.

Sociologists who adopt this perspective, e.g. Townsend, argue sociologists should be involved in researching social problems and making policy recommendations to eradicate them.

For example, Townsend conducted research on poverty. On the basis of this he recommended policies more spending on health, education and welfare.

The Black Report on class inequalities in health made 37 policy recommendations for reducing this, e.g. free school meals for all children. The Conservative government at the time didn’t implement the recommendations due to cost.

*Criticisms*

Marxists argue even radical policies are insufficient and social problems can only be solved by the abolishment of capitalism.

Postmodernists argue it is impossible to discover objective truth. All knowledge produced by research is uncertain and so sociological research cannot provide a basis for policy making.

**Marxism**

They do not see the state and social policies as benefitting all members of society. Instead these policies serve the interests of capitalism and the ruling class:

* Policies legitimise and hide capitalist exploitation, e.g. the welfare state makes it appear that capitalism cares about the poor, sick and old.
* Policies maintain the labour force for further exploitation, e.g. the NHS ensures workers are fit enough to work which benefits capitalism.
* Policies prevent revolution when class conflict intensifies, e.g. the policies which created the welfare state after 1945 were a way of preventing working class revolution.

Marxists recognise that some policies do benefit the working class. However these benefits are constantly threatened by the fact that there are periodic crises of capitalism which lead to spending cuts.

Therefore research that reveals the truth about problems capitalism creates will not be used to formulate policies to solve these problems, e.g. the Black Report. The state cannot solve social problems anyway as it is capitalist and therefore the only solution to social problems is a proletarian revolution.

For Marxists, the sociologist’s main role should be to criticise capitalist social policy.

*Criticisms*

Some sociologists argue Marxist views on sociologists and social policies are unrealistic and impractical.

Social democrats criticise Marxists as they argue research can bring about progressive policies within the capitalist system, e.g. poverty researchers have at times had some positive impact on policy.

**Feminism**

Feminists argue social policies maintain patriarchy, e.g. family policies assume the ‘normal’ family is a nuclear family. Therefore the state offers benefits to married couples which makes it more difficult for people to live in other kinds of family structure.

However, feminist research has had an impact in a number of policy areas, e.g. in education it has influenced policies such as learning materials that promote more positive images of females. Many of these policies reflect the liberal feminist view that anti-discrimination reforms will bring about gender equality.

Radical feminist ideas have also had some influence on social policy. They favour separatism, which is the idea that women need to separate themselves from men to be free from patriarchy. One policy that reflects this is refuges for women escaping domestic violence. For example, the Women’s Aid Federation supports a national network of over 500 of such services, often with government funding.

However, Marxist and radical feminists reject the idea that policies can solve social problems. Instead they would look for significant changes in the structure of society.

**The New Right**

The New Right believe the state should have only minimal involvement in society. They argue state intervention robs people of their freedom to make their own choices and undermines their sense of responsibility. This then leads to social problems.

For example, Murray argues generous welfare benefits encourage the growth of dependency, lone parenthood and undisciplined children. Therefore he supports a reduction in state spending on welfare.

The New Right are therefore critical of many existing policies. However, they see the role of sociologists as being to propose alternative policies which should restore individual responsibility.

For example, a report by the Social Justice Policy Group, a think tank, proposes policies aimed at the family, including marriage preparation and parenting classes and tax and benefit support for stay at home mums.

The New Right has had an influence on government policies reducing welfare spending, marketisation in education and zero tolerance crime policies.

Positivism

Interpretivism

Quantitative data/methods

Qualitative data/methods

Primary data

Secondary data

Reliability

Standardised

Repeatability

Validity

Verstehen

Hawthorne effect

Social desirability

Researcher bias

Status differences

Representativeness

Generalizability

Sample

Informed consent

Anonymity

Confidentiality

Gatekeeper

Sampling frame

Target population

Simple random sampling

Systematic random sampling

Stratified random sampling

Quota sampling

Snowball sampling

Cluster/multi-stage sampling

Opportunity/convenience sampling

Structured/closed questionnaires

Unstructured/open questionnaires

Self completion questionnaires

Response rate

Structured/formal interviews

Unstructured/informal interviews

Semi structured interviews

Group interviews/focus groups

Non participant observation

Participant observation

Overt observation

Covert observation

Going native

Laboratory experiments

Field experiments

Comparative method

Ecological validity

Longitudinal study

Case study

Official statistics

Personal documents

Public documents

Historical documents

Content analysis

Hypothesis

Operationalization

Pilot study

Consensus theories

Conflict theories

Structuralism

Social action/interpretivism

Integrated approaches

Macro approach

Organic analogy

Functional prerequisites

Goal attainment

Adaptation

Integration

Latency

Value consensus

Social solidarity

Structural differentiation

Manifest functions

Latent functions

Dysfunction

Economic base

Means of production

Relations of production

Superstructure

Bourgeoisie

Proletariat

Surplus value

Dominant ideology

False class consciousness

Polarisation

Relative autonomy

Hegemony

Repressive state apparatus

Ideological state apparatus

Micro approach

Symbolic interactionism

Ethnomethodology

Looking glass self

Negotiated interaction

Labelling

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Impression management

Dramaturgical model

Breaching experiments

Structuration

Reflexivity

Duality of structure

Malestream

Liberal feminism

Radical feminism

Marxist feminism

Dual systems feminism

Difference feminism

Sexual politics

Reserve army of labour

Expressive role

Unpaid domestic labour

Patriarchal capitalism

Modernity

Postmodernity

High culture

Popular culture

Globalisation

Hyperreality

Metanarratives

Liquid modernity

Social structures

Disembedding

Time space compression

The end of the social

Media saturated society

Simulacra

Pick and mix

Shopping for identities

Supermarket of style

Conspicuous consumption

Symbolic significance of goods

Late/high modernity

Social reflexivity

Reflexive modernity

Risk society

Hypothetico-deductive method

Falsification

Social facts

Social institutions

Empirical evidence

Social constructions

Realism

Open systems

Closed systems

Paradigms

Scientific revolutions

Reconstructed logic

Logic in use

Fragmented

Subjectivity

Objectivity

Value freedom

Value relevance

Value commitment

Respondent validation

Inductive approach

Grounded theory

Methodological pluralism

Triangulation

Social policy

Social problem

Piecemeal social engineering