

# 3 Methodology

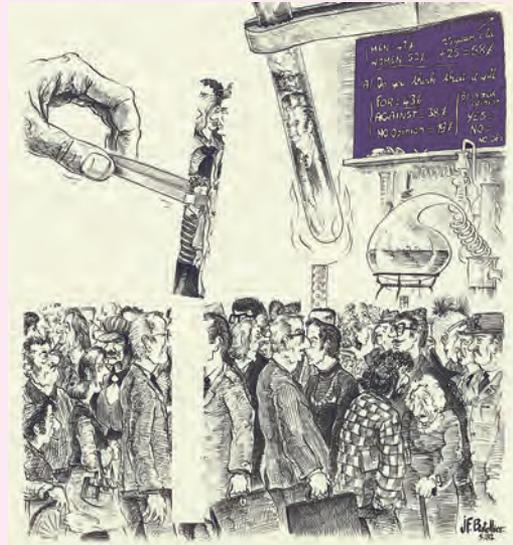
## Introduction

Methodology refers to the whole research process – to the methods used to collect data, to the analysis of the data, and to the theories which underlie both.

At its simplest, methodology refers to research methods such as interviews and questionnaires. What are their strengths and weaknesses, how good is the data they produce? These questions were examined in *Sociology in Focus for AQA AS Level*.

At the other extreme, methodology deals with philosophical questions such as the nature of knowledge. How can we say that one statement is true and another false? How can we 'know' anything? This chapter examines some of the attempts to answer such questions.

*The scientific method - one view of methodology*



## chaptersummary

- ▶ **Unit 1** looks at ways of assessing the validity and reliability of research data.
- ▶ **Unit 2** examines various views of science and their application to sociological research.
- ▶ **Unit 3** looks at interpretivist methodology.
- ▶ **Unit 4** looks at postmodernist methodology.
- ▶ **Unit 5** looks at feminist methodology.
- ▶ **Unit 6** considers the relationship between values and sociological research.
- ▶ **Unit 7** examines the relationship between sociology and social policy.

## Unit 1 Assessing research findings

### keyissues

- 1 How valid and reliable are research findings?
- 2 Do researchers affect the data they collect?
- 3 What are the advantages of combining various research methods and types of data?

Sociological research methods were outlined and evaluated in *Sociology in Focus for AQA AS Level*. This unit takes a more general view of the research process. It asks how good are research findings and how do we know?

### 1.1 Quantitative and qualitative methods and data

**Quantitative data** is data in a numerical form - in the form of numbers. Official statistics are an obvious example. Questionnaires and structured interviews are the usual research methods used to obtain quantitative data. Their

responses can often be fairly easily translated into numbers.

Some researchers argue that unless human behaviour is expressed in numerical terms, it cannot be accurately measured. Without accurate measurement conclusions will be based on impressions and as such will be little more than unsupported opinion.

**Qualitative data** covers a range of material from the descriptions of social life provided by participant observation and unstructured interviews to information from written sources such as diaries, autobiographies and novels. Some researchers argue that qualitative data provides greater depth, a richer and more detailed picture of social life. It is more likely to capture the subtleties, nuances and shades of meaning than the numerical data provided by quantitative methods.

Use of the contrast quantitative/qualitative implies either/or and better/worse – that researchers use and favour either one or other type of data. In practice, most researchers use both kinds of data, recognising their strengths and weaknesses and seeing them as suited to

different purposes. For example, the findings of a small-scale participant observation study can form the basis for a questionnaire used in a large-scale social survey. And, as we shall see shortly, quantitative and qualitative data can be used together as 1) a means of checking the other and 2) building up a more complete picture of social life.

## 1.2 Validity and reliability

**Validity** refers to the accuracy of a description or measurement. Data is valid if it gives a true picture of a way of life or an accurate measurement of something. For example, official statistics on crime are valid if they provide an accurate measurement of the extent of crime.

Some researchers argue that qualitative data with its depth and richness is more likely than quantitative data to provide a valid picture of social life. However, methods used to collect qualitative data, such as participant observation, rely heavily on the interpretive skills of the researcher. It is therefore difficult to assess the validity of the data they produce. Possible ways of doing this will be examined shortly.

**Reliability** Research methods and data are reliable when different researchers using the same methods obtain similar results. For example, if the same questionnaire and the same sampling procedure produce similar results when used by different researchers, then the methods and the data are reliable. A reliable method allows studies to be replicated, ie repeated.

## 1.3 Triangulation

Triangulation is a term used to describe various ways of assessing the validity and reliability of research methods and data (Denzin, 1970). It looks at the topic under investigation from different angles and vantage points. Triangulation can take various forms. These include:

**1 Investigator triangulation** This involves the use of different researchers, eg different observers and interviewers. The aim is to check for observer and interviewer bias by, for example, using interviewers from different social backgrounds.

**2 Data triangulation** This involves collecting data at different times from different people in different places. It can also involve combining primary and secondary data. Data triangulation serves as a cross-check for validity. It can also serve as a means of assessing researchers' interpretations and conclusions.

**3 Methodological triangulation** This takes two forms. 'Within-method' triangulation uses a variety of techniques within the same method, for example open and closed questions within a questionnaire. Asking similar questions in a variety of ways can check on the validity of the answers and the reliability of the method. 'Between-method' triangulation refers to the combination of a number of research methods, for example questionnaires, unstructured interviews and participant observation. The

data produced by each method can be checked by comparing it with the data produced by the other methods.

The idea of triangulation is illustrated by the following quotation from *Belfast in the 30s: An oral history* (quoted in Macdonald & Tipton, 1993).

'In the first place we carried out ... "investigator triangulation". That is, each transcript was checked by two or three researchers to ensure that it said what people had meant to say. In the second place, we systematically did a cross-method triangulation, in that every piece of oral evidence that could be, was checked against a range of written sources: newspapers, parliamentary reports, documents etc. Finally, there was a considerable amount of data triangulation possible within the oral sources themselves' (Munck & Rolston, 1987).

## 1.4 Reflexivity

A White male middle-class researcher – and most of them are – will tend to see the social world he studies through White male middle-class eyes. And, to some extent, he will be seen by those he studies in terms of his social identity which will influence the way they respond to him. In these respects social research is *reflexive* – it reflects and is shaped by the researcher.

As a researcher, our findings will be coloured by our social background, our experiences and our culture. What we see and how we interpret it will be influenced by the fact that we are social beings. Social research involves social relationships. To some extent those being studied will be influenced by the presence of the researcher.

The idea of reflexivity also refers to a recognition, an awareness, that research is reflexive. This awareness means that, as researchers, we should be critical of ourselves, our research and our findings. We should examine ourselves in order to discover to what extent our findings reflect our own beliefs and values. We should question whether our presence affects the actions of those we study. This critical awareness will help us get nearer to our goal – a valid picture of social reality. (The influence of values on research is examined in Unit 4.)

**Assessing validity** How do sociologists attempt to minimise their influence on research? How do they try to ensure the validity of their data? Some of the ways of assessing research findings have been discussed under the heading of triangulation. Some others will now be examined.

**Asking the researched** In his study of an Italian American gang in Boston, William Whyte (1955) discussed his findings with Doc, the leader of the gang. Doc assessed Whyte's interpretation of the gang's behaviour from an insider's viewpoint.

**Playing the part** Aaron Cicourel (1976) spent four years studying probation officers in California. Part of this time was spent as an unpaid probation officer. His aim was to discover the meanings used by probation officers to define

young people as delinquent. Cicourel claimed that by learning to play the part of a probation officer, he was able to identify the same young people as delinquents as his full time colleagues. This provided support for his interpretation of the meanings that *they* used to define delinquency.

**Presenting the data** In *The Social Organisation of Juvenile Justice*, the published report of his findings, Cicourel presents lengthy extracts from conversations between probation officers and juveniles along with detailed descriptions of their interaction. Although this presentation is selective – it represents only a small part of his field notes – it gives others some opportunity to assess Cicourel’s interpretation of the data.

**Comparing results** Researchers often compare their findings with those of others who have conducted similar research. This comparison encourages them to question their results and to assess to what extent their findings reflect their research methods and their own beliefs and values.

**Critical self-awareness** None of the above methods is foolproof but they do encourage a critical self-awareness which can only assist the quest for validity. Recognising the

reflexive nature of social research is an important step forward. (Unit 4 develops this point.)

### Dialogic research

Awareness of reflexivity has led some sociologists to examine the relationship between researchers and those they research. They argue that this relationship is unequal. The researcher directs operations, decides what’s important, what questions to ask, who to ask, and who to observe – when, where and for how long. The voices of the researched can be lost in this process, and so can the validity of the research findings. A possible solution to this problem is *dialogic research*.

Dialogic research involves a dialogue between researcher and researched. It is about the researcher letting go of power and inviting the researched to set the agenda, to decide what’s important and how to express it (Puwar, 2001).

Phil Cohen’s (1996-97) research on youth in East London provides an example of the dialogic method. Some of the young people were given cameras and tape recorders and asked to record their social world in their own way. As a result, the researched also became the researchers.

## activity1 triangulation

Carolyn Hoyle’s research examined how the police dealt with domestic violence. She used a variety of methods – ‘interviews with police officers and victims, observation of officers on duty, and examination of official records were all used to understand the police response to incidents of domestic violence’.

She interviewed victims *after* she had interviewed police officers ‘partly to ensure that the police officers had given me an accurate version of the incident and of the wishes of the victims’. She used semi-structured interviews which produced ‘quantitative data and qualitative descriptions’.

In discussions with the researcher and talking amongst themselves, police officers sometimes trivialised domestic violence. Dealing with ‘domestics’ was more trouble than it was worth, it was exasperating because they were ‘so grieved’. These comments may reflect the ‘canteen culture’ of police stations where officers get things off their chests and put on a show of bravado. But, when asked about specific incidents, their replies contradicted these comments. They said they listened carefully to both sides in the dispute and had done their best to deal sympathetically and effectively with the situation. These claims were supported by Carolyn Hoyle’s direct observation of officers dealing with domestic violence.

Adapted from Hoyle, 2000



Canteen culture

### question

- 1 In what ways can Hoyle’s research be seen as an example of triangulation?
- 2 With reference to Hoyle’s research, outline the advantages of triangulation.

Dialogic research offers an opportunity to capture people's outlook, priorities, hopes and anxieties with a minimum of intrusion by the 'official' researcher. This concern is often reflected in feminist research – see pages 143-145.

## 1.5 Methodological pluralism

Methodological pluralism is similar to triangulation and can serve a similar purpose. However, its aim is not so much as a means of checking validity and reliability but rather to build up a fuller picture of social life by combining different research methods and different types of data. It recognises that each method and type of data has its particular strengths and weaknesses. Combined they are seen to produce a more comprehensive and rounder picture of social reality. And their combination can also provide new insights and new directions for research.

Some of the strengths of methodological pluralism can be seen from Eileen Barker's (1984) study of the Moonies – the Unification Church. She conducted in-depth interviews, each lasting 6-8 hours, with a number of Moonies. The interviews dealt with their background, why they became a Moonie, their life in the church and the meaning of religion as they saw it. Barker also lived as a participant observer in several centres with the Moonies at various times during the six years of her research. This enabled her to gain the trust of many members of the church, resulting in information which would not have been given to an outsider. Two years after the start of her research, she constructed a large (41 page) questionnaire based on her findings from interviews and observation. This provided

## key terms

**Quantitative data** Numerical data – data in the form of numbers.

**Qualitative data** All types of data that are not in the form of numbers.

**Validity** Data is valid if it presents a true and accurate description or measurement.

**Reliability** Data is reliable when different researchers using the same methods obtain the same results, ie the same description or measurement.

**Triangulation** Using different researchers and/or combining different research methods and different types of data in order to check the validity and reliability of findings.

**Reflexivity** The idea that the findings of social research are shaped by the researcher – by their beliefs and values, by their meanings and interpretations, and by the relationships they develop with research participants.

**Dialogic research** Research that involves a dialogue between researcher and researched, that allows those being studied to directly participate in the research process.

**Methodological pluralism** Combining different research methods and different kinds of data in order to build up a fuller picture of social life.

information from a larger sample and was intended to reveal 'social patterns, trends and tendencies and gain a more reliable understanding of regularities between variables - of "what goes with what"'.

Barker claims that combining different methods of investigation gave her a much fuller picture than any one method or data source could have provided.

## summary

1. Many researchers use both quantitative and qualitative data, while recognising the strengths and weaknesses of each.
2. Triangulation provides a way of assessing the validity and reliability of research findings. It takes three main forms:
  - Investigator triangulation
  - Data triangulation
  - Methodological triangulation.
3. Social research is reflexive – to some extent it reflects and is shaped by the researcher. This can seriously affect the validity of research findings.
4. Dialogic research may improve the validity of research findings. It offers research participants the opportunity to take part in the direction of the research – to set the agenda, to decide what's important and even conduct their own research. This allows the voices of the researched to be heard.
5. Apart from triangulation and an awareness of reflexivity, there are various ways of assessing the validity of research findings. They include:
  - Asking research participants if the researcher has got it right
  - Playing the part – successfully acting out the role of those being studied
  - Presenting the data – providing sufficient data for others to make a judgement about its validity
  - Comparing research findings with the results of similar studies.
6. Methodological pluralism combines different research methods and different kinds of data with the aim of producing a more detailed, in-depth and comprehensive picture of social life.

## Unit 2 Sociology and science

### key issues

- 1 What is science? What are scientific methods?
- 2 Are the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences appropriate to the study of human behaviour?

Sociology is often referred to as a *social science*. Whether or not it can be seen as a scientific discipline is one of the major debates within the subject. The founding fathers of sociology in the 19th century were, however, in no doubt. By following the rules and logic of the scientific method, sociology could discover the laws underlying the development of human society. And, in this respect, it was a science just like the *natural sciences* of physics and chemistry which seek to discover the laws underlying the behaviour of matter.

### 2.1 Auguste Comte – positivism

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is credited with inventing the term sociology. He argued that sociology should be based on the methodology of the natural sciences. This would result in a 'positive science of society' which would reveal the 'invariable laws' which governed the evolution of human society. Comte's approach is known as *positivism*.

Comte insisted that only directly observable 'facts' were acceptable as evidence in his science of society. Anything that couldn't be directly measured, such as subjective meanings and purposes, was ruled out. The facts of society must be objectively measured and quantified, ie put into a numerical form. It would then be possible to identify cause and effect relationships and discover the laws underlying social evolution.

### 2.2 Emile Durkheim – the rules of sociological method

**Social facts** In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, first published in 1895, Durkheim outlined the logic and methods to be followed for sociology to become a science of society. The starting point, 'the first and most fundamental rule is: Consider social facts as things'. Social facts are the institutions, beliefs and values of society. As things, social facts can be treated in the same way as the objects, events and processes of the natural world. They can be objectively measured, quantified and subjected to statistical analysis. Correlations can be drawn between social facts, cause and effect relationships established and theories developed to explain those relationships. In this way 'real laws are discoverable' in the social world as in the natural world.

But how can social facts be treated as things? Aren't

beliefs, for example, part of human consciousness? And aren't human beings, because they have consciousness, fundamentally different from the inanimate objects which make up the natural world? In view of this, is natural science methodology appropriate for the study of human behaviour?

**External reality** Durkheim accepted that social facts form part of our consciousness – they have to for society to exist. Without shared norms and values, for example, society could not operate. But, although they are a part of us, social facts also exist outside of us. In Durkheim's words, 'collective ways of acting and thinking have a reality outside the individuals'. Members of society do not simply act in terms of their particular psychology and personal beliefs. Instead they are directed to act by social facts, by values and beliefs which are over and above the individual and part of the wider society. In this respect social facts 'have a reality outside the individuals' and can therefore be studied 'objectively as external things'.

Thus just as matter is constrained to act by natural forces, so human beings are constrained to act by social forces. Given this, social facts can be studied using the methodology of the natural sciences.

**The social facts of suicide** Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* was published in 1897. This study exemplified his rules of sociological method. Durkheim argued that the causes of suicide rates (the number of suicides per million of the population) are to be found in society, *not* in the psychology of individuals. Suicide rates are social facts. They are also a product of social facts, of 'real, living, active forces which, because of the way they determine the individual, prove their independence from him'.

**Statistical evidence** Durkheim examined official statistics on suicide from a number of European countries (see Item A, Activity 2, p135). He found that 1) suicide rates within each country were fairly constant over a number of years and 2) there were significant differences in the rates both between societies and between social groups within the same society.

**Correlation and analysis** Durkheim found correlations between suicide rates and a wide range of social facts. For example, he found statistical relationships between suicide rates and religion, location, age and family situation. Some of these are illustrated in the following table. In each of the pairs, the group on the left had a higher suicide rate than the group on the right.

Protestants	-	Catholics
City dwellers	-	Rural dwellers
Older adults	-	Younger adults
Unmarried	-	Married
Married without children	-	Married with children

**Causation** Having established correlations between social facts, Durkheim's next task was to see if he could discover causal connections. He argued that variations in suicide rates were caused by variations in levels of social integration that is the extent to which individuals are part of a wider social group. In the case of the examples given above, the groups on the left have lower levels of social integration than the groups on the right. For example, older adults are less socially integrated than younger adults because their children have grown up and left home, many of their friends and relatives have died, and if they have retired from work they may well have lost touch with their workmates. Using examples such as this, Durkheim claimed that 'suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part' – that is, the higher an individual's social integration the less likely they are to take their own life.

**Theory and explanation** Durkheim's final task was to explain why suicide rates vary with levels of social integration. Part of his explanation runs as follows. As members of society, people are social beings – they have been socialised to play a part in society. The greater their social isolation the less they can participate in society. Their lives lack meaning and purpose unless they are shared with others. In Durkheim's words, 'The individual alone is not a sufficient end for his activity. He is too little.' In a situation of social isolation, 'the individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance because the state of society has made him ready prey to suicide'.

Durkheim doesn't claim to explain all aspects of suicide. For example, he does not explain why only a small minority of socially isolated individuals commit suicide. He sees this as the job of the psychologist because it concerns individual behaviour rather than social facts.

Durkheim believed that his research on suicide proved that scientific methodology was appropriate for the study of society, because it had shown that 'real laws are discoverable'. (For further discussion of Durkheim's study of suicide see pages 264-268. For a broader discussion of Durkheim's view of society, see pages 164-167).

## 2.3 Karl Popper – deduction and falsification

**Induction vs deduction** Durkheim argued that theories should come from evidence, from gathering data, from describing, classifying and analysing social facts. It is from this process that theories are generated. This is known as an *inductive* approach.

A *deductive* approach reverses this process. It begins with a theory and uses data to test that theory. This is the approach advocated by Karl Popper. From his viewpoint it is the only way science can proceed.

**Falsification** According to Popper rather than looking for evidence to confirm their theories, scientists should do their best to disprove or falsify them. This is the distinguishing characteristic of science – the development

of theories which can be tested against evidence and be capable of *falsification*.

This means that theories must be constructed in such a way that falsification is possible. Popper argues that Marx's theory of history fails in this respect – it cannot be falsified and is therefore non-scientific. In particular, it fails to specify precisely what has to happen before the proletarian revolution occurs in capitalist society. And when the revolution does not happen, Marxists simply push its coming further and further into the future, thus preventing the possibility of falsification.

Popper rejects the search for laws governing the evolution of human society, which he sees as a 'unique historical process' (1959). However, he sees no reason why the methodology of the natural sciences cannot be applied to the social sciences. Theories of human behaviour which are open to the possibility of falsification can be developed.

Theories that survive falsification tests, however, are not necessarily true. They have simply not been falsified. The following oft-quoted example illustrates this point. 'All swans are white' is a scientific statement because it can be falsified. But, however many times it is confirmed by observation, it cannot be accepted as true because the very next swan might be black, red, blue or yellow. In this respect, there are no absolute truths in science.

**Sociology and falsification** Despite Popper's claim to the contrary, there are real problems in applying his model of scientific methodology to the study of human society. In the closed system of the laboratory where variables such as matter, temperature and pressure can be controlled, it may be possible to falsify a theory. However, human societies are open systems which means it is impossible to control variables. Because of this, it is difficult to see how a theory can be falsified.

## 2.4 Thomas Kuhn – normal science

For Durkheim, science consists of accumulating evidence and developing theories from that evidence. For Popper, science consists of creating testable theories and attempting to falsify them. For Thomas Kuhn 'normal science' – the vast majority of work which is called science – differs from both these views. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) argues that the way science has developed bears little relationship to conventional views of the scientific method.

**Paradigms** According to Kuhn, most of the time scientists are busily preoccupied with 'normal science'. Normal science operates within a *paradigm*. A paradigm is a framework of concepts and theories which states how the natural world operates. It identifies appropriate methods for studying that world and specifies what questions to ask and how to answer them. A paradigm is shared by members of the scientific community. It shapes the way they see the world they study.

In some respects paradigms are like blinkers – they place limits on inquiry, they erect barriers to alternative views,

they restrict the scientific imagination. This is because normal science operates within the confines of a paradigm – developing and refining it but not challenging it. For example, until the 16th century Western astronomy was based on the theory of terracentricity – the idea that planets and the sun move around the earth. It is perfectly possible to confirm this idea with observations and measurements. And it is also possible to ignore or explain away contradictory evidence which might challenge it. So committed are scientists to the existing paradigm that they operate within it rather than attempting to falsify it.

**Scientific revolutions** Kuhn rejects the conventional view which sees science as a progressive accumulation of knowledge based on the testing and proving and disproving of hypotheses. Change does occur, but only when one paradigm is replaced by another. Kuhn calls this process a *scientific revolution* – it is sudden and revolutionary as a whole way of thinking about the world is swept away within a relatively short period of time. An example is the replacement of Newton's paradigm in physics with Einstein's. Once a new paradigm is established, normal science resumes and any real change has to wait until the next scientific revolution.

Scientific revolutions occur when evidence accumulates which cannot be explained in terms of the existing paradigm. This evidence accumulates to the point where it cannot be ignored, dismissed as an anomaly or as the result of incorrect observation and measurement. This happened with the Copernican revolution in astronomy in the 16th century. Copernicus stated that the sun, not the earth was the centre of the universe and that the planets orbited the sun. This view of the universe appeared to make sense of observations that could not be explained in terms of the previous paradigm.

Kuhn's view of paradigms and scientific revolutions has been criticised as a distortion of the history of science. For example, Lakatos (1970) rejects the view that normal science is dominated by a single paradigm. Instead, he sees the development of science as a history of constantly competing paradigms.

**Sociology and paradigms** In terms of Kuhn's view of science it has been argued that sociology is in a pre-paradigmatic and therefore pre-scientific situation. There is a range of competing sociological perspectives and there is little indication that this variety will develop into a single paradigm which will be acceptable to the sociological community. However, in terms of Lakatos' view, this does not disqualify sociology from being a science. In fact, sociology's history of competing perspectives largely accords with his view of the history of science.

## 2.5 The realist approach to science

The realist view of science, while accepting that there are basic differences between the social and natural worlds, maintains that a social science is possible. It argues that events in both the social and natural worlds are produced

by underlying structures and mechanisms. According to Roy Bhaskar, the essential task of realism is to uncover and explain these structures and mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1978).

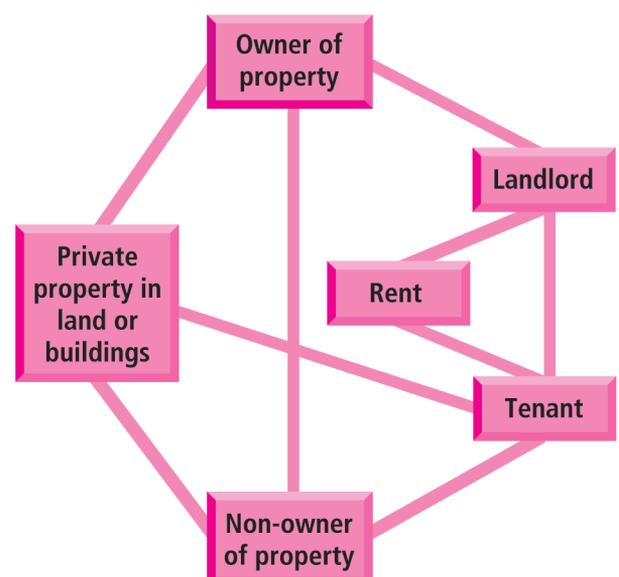
**Open and closed systems** Andrew Sayer (1992) distinguishes between open and closed systems as arenas of study. The laboratory is the prime example of a *closed system*. Sciences like physics and chemistry have the advantage of being able to create closed systems in which conditions can be fixed and variables controlled. This allows them to reveal 'more clearly the operation of mechanisms' (Sayer, 1992).

However, a large body of scientific research takes place within *open systems* where it is not possible to control variables. Meteorology is an example of a natural science where closed systems are rare. As a result, it is unable to predict the weather with any degree of accuracy, as daily weather forecasts indicate. However, it is able to offer an explanation of the weather after the event in terms of underlying mechanisms. In much the same way, geology is able to provide explanations for the occurrence of oil deposits. However, geologists' attempts to predict its presence have only limited success as the billions of dollars spent on unsuccessful oil exploration show.

One of the most famous non-predictive explanations is the theory of evolution, which specifies mechanisms such as natural selection and mutation which are seen to underlie the evolutionary process. But, because evolution takes place within an open system it is not possible to predict its future.

Human behaviour takes place in open systems. Because of this it is not possible to predict its course with any degree of accuracy. There is no way of controlling all the variables which affect human action. However, from a realist viewpoint, this does not rule out a social science. It is still possible to explain human behaviour in terms of underlying structures and mechanisms, just as

The landlord-tenant structure



From Sayer, 1992

meteorologists, geologists and evolutionary biologists explain behaviour in the natural world.

**Structures, mechanisms and consciousness** From a realist point of view, human behaviour operates within structures. Sayer (1992) defines structures as 'sets of internally related objects and practices'. He gives the following example using the landlord-tenant relation. The diagram illustrates the necessary relations for its existence. In Sayer's words, 'The landlord-tenant relation itself presupposes the existence of private property, rent, the production of economic surplus and so on; together they form a structure'. There are of course structures within structures. For example, the landlord-tenant structure forms part of the wider class structure in capitalist society.

Structures constrain human behaviour, they place limits on human action. However, this does not mean that human beings are simply directed by structural constraints. In the open system which is human society, they have varying degrees of freedom to direct their own actions. Realists include consciousness as part of the explanation for behaviour. They accept the interpretivist view of social reality as socially constructed. And they also accept the Marxist view of false consciousness – that socially constructed meanings can distort reality (Blaikie, 1993).

Mechanisms operate within structures. It is part of the scientist's job to identify these mechanisms and explain how they work. And in this respect the social scientist's job is the same as the natural scientist's. So just as an evolutionary biologist identifies mechanisms such as natural selection to account for biological change, so a sociologist identifies mechanisms such as the class struggle to account for social change.

**Realism, sociology and science** From a realist viewpoint, events in both the natural and social worlds are produced by structures and mechanisms. Given this, social science is based on the same principles as natural science. Both are concerned with the identification and explanation of structures and mechanisms. (For an analysis of Durkheim as a realist, see page 268.)

## 2.6 Sociology and science – conclusion

**Objectivity** The traditional picture of a scientist is of a rational, logical researcher who collects and explains 'facts'. In terms of the research process, he or she is objective, value-free and unbiased. The 'facts' are undistorted and uncontaminated – they are not coloured by the beliefs, experiences and values of the researcher.

Unit 1 has argued that, as far as sociology is concerned, this view of the researcher and the research process is a myth. Whether this disqualifies sociology as a science is a matter of opinion. Researchers in the natural sciences are also influenced by their beliefs and values. Kuhn's view of science suggests that the concepts and theories which make up paradigms are, in part, articles of faith – they include many of the common-sense beliefs of the time, for example, the belief that the earth is the centre of the universe.

These points are developed in Unit 6, Sociology, Methodology and Values, which asks:

- Is an objective, value-free sociology possible?
- And, is it desirable?

**Natural and social science** The natural and social sciences study different things. The natural sciences study matter which behaves in a predictable manner in a given situation. Matter simply reacts to a particular stimulus. There is no need for the natural scientist to interpret meanings and motives and discover beliefs and values in order to explain the behaviour of matter.

The same is not true for sociologists. Human beings define situations and act accordingly. They give meanings to events and act in terms of those meanings. And the beliefs and values they hold direct their behaviour. In view of this, sociologists have to discover definitions, meanings, beliefs and values in order to understand human action.

This has led many sociologists to argue that natural science methods are not suitable for the study of human behaviour. Interpreting meanings is very different from observing inanimate objects. And if sociology is seen as a science, then it is a very different science from the likes of physics and chemistry.

These points are developed in the next two units – Unit 3 Interpretivist Methodology and Unit 4 Postmodernist Methodology.

**Views of science** There are many views of science and scientific methods. As a result, there are many views about the relationship between sociology and science, and about the appropriateness of applying the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences to the study of human

### key terms

**Positivism** In Comte's view, a method of study based on directly observable facts, objectively measured, from which it is possible to identify cause and effect relationships and discover laws underlying social evolution.

**Social facts** In Durkheim's view, the institutions, beliefs and values of society, which although they exist within individuals also exist outside of them and direct their behaviour.

**Inductive approach** Developing theories from evidence.

**Deductive approach** Beginning with a theory and using evidence to test that theory.

**Falsification** The process of testing a theory against evidence and showing the theory to be false.

**Normal science** Science which operates within an established paradigm.

**Paradigm** A framework of concepts and theories which states how the natural world operates.

**Scientific revolution** The overthrow of an established paradigm by a new paradigm.

**Realist approach** Assumes that events in both the natural and social worlds are produced by underlying structures and mechanisms.

**Closed system** A system in which all the variables can be controlled.

**Open system** A system in which it is not possible to control all the variables.

## summary

1. Comte believed that sociology should be based on the methodology of the natural sciences.
2. Durkheim argued that social facts have a reality outside individuals. Social facts can therefore be studied as 'things'. This means that the methodology of the natural sciences can be used to study human society.
3. Durkheim argued that his study of suicide supported this view. He claimed to have discovered cause and effect relationships between social facts.
4. According to Popper, science is based on the development of theories which can be tested against evidence and be capable of falsification. It is difficult to see how sociology can fit this view of science. Human societies are open systems which means that it is impossible to control variables. Because of this, it is difficult to see how a theory can be falsified.
5. According to Kuhn, 'normal science' operates within a paradigm. A scientific revolution occurs when the existing paradigm is overthrown by a new paradigm.
6. Sociology has a range of competing perspectives rather than a single paradigm. In terms of Kuhn's view of science, it is in a pre-paradigmatic and, therefore, pre-scientific situation.
7. From a realist viewpoint, events in both the social and natural worlds are produced by underlying structures and mechanisms. In view of this, there is no reason why sociology cannot be a science.
8. Human society is an open system. So is the world in which natural sciences such as meteorology and geology operate. Again, there is no reason why sociology cannot be a science.
9. In view of the differences between the natural world and the social world, many researchers argue that natural science methodology is inappropriate for the study of human society.

## activity 2 views of science

### Item A Suicide statistics

Rate of suicides per million inhabitants in European countries

	1866-70	Period		Numerical position in the		
		1871-75	1874-78	1st period	2nd period	3rd period
Italy	30	35	38	1	1	1
Belgium	66	69	78	2	3	4
England	67	66	69	3	2	2
Norway	76	73	71	4	4	3
Austria	78	94	130	5	7	7
Sweden	85	81	91	6	5	5
Bavaria	90	91	100	7	6	6
France	135	150	160	8	9	9
Prussia	142	134	152	9	8	8
Denmark	277	258	255	10	10	10
Saxony	293	267	334	11	11	11

Adapted from Durkheim, 1970 (originally published in 1897)

### Item B An open system

Man-made pollution and climatic change are threatening the survival of the world's great whales. Nine years after commercial whaling was banned, the effects of global industrialisation now pose as great a threat to the world's largest mammals as the huge factory whaling fleets of the past. The hazards are outlined in scientific papers submitted to the International Whaling Commission. The authors argue that chemical pollution, ozone depletion and global warming are hindering the recovery of whale populations hunted almost to extinction in the 60s and 70s.

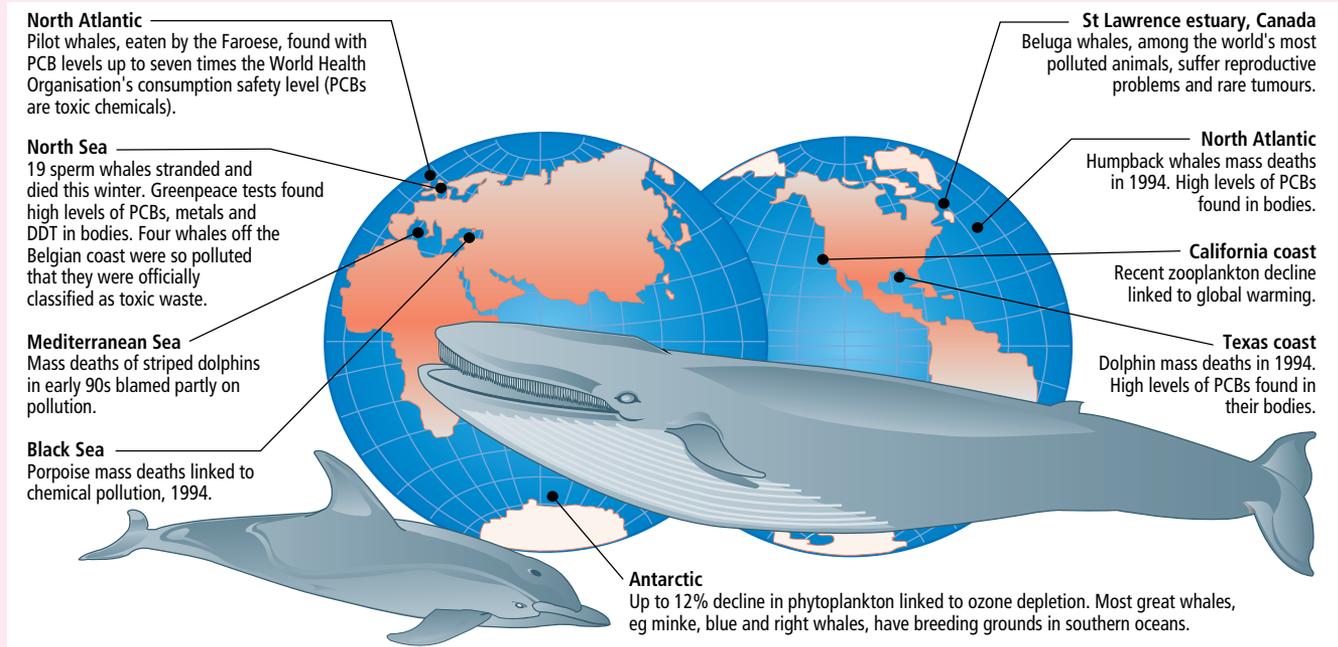
A separate report by biologist Dr Kevin Brown, commissioned by the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency, estimates that at least 150,000 man-made chemicals, increasing by 2,000 a year, are dumped in the oceans. He warns that damage to marine life caused by global warming and a thinning ozone layer could worsen the effects of chemicals through complex interactions which scientists are unable to predict.

'There are vast gaps in our knowledge ... but I wouldn't be surprised if there is a spiralling effect and whale numbers start crashing,' said Dr Brown, of Durham University.

His fears are echoed by Dr Mark Simmonds, of the University of Greenwich, who points out that six mass deaths of seals and dolphins have been recorded since 1987 – all in highly contaminated waters such as the North Sea – compared with only four over the previous eight decades.

Although viruses were the immediate cause of death, he argues that pollution must have played a major role.

Adapted from *The Observer*, 28.5.1995



## questions

- Durkheim claimed that 'each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths'.
  - What support for this statement is provided by Item A?
  - Use Item A to support Durkheim's claim that a science of society is possible.
- Use Item B to support the realist view that:
  - both the social and natural sciences operate in open systems
  - conclusive verification or falsification are not possible in open systems
  - in view of this, there are basic similarities between the methodologies of the natural and social sciences.

## Unit 3 Interpretivist methodology

### key issues

- How significant are meanings for understanding social action?
- What are the similarities and differences between the main interpretivist perspectives?

Interpretivist sociology covers a range of theoretical perspectives which see fundamental differences between the natural and social worlds. From an interpretivist perspective, the social world is essentially a world of meaning. Human beings construct their own social reality.

Their actions are directed by meanings, their experience is based on meanings. Any understanding of human action must therefore involve an understanding of those meanings. And for many researchers, this means employing methodologies which are very different from those used in the natural sciences.

### 3.1 Max Weber – social action

**Social action** Max Weber (1864-1920) defined sociology as 'a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (1964). Social action

is action which involves other members of society. It is based on meanings in the minds of social actors which direct their actions. Weber was particularly concerned with motives – the intentions and purposes which direct social actors to achieve certain goals.

**Verstehen** Motives are an important part of any explanation of social action. Weber's method of interpreting motives is known as *verstehen* which roughly translates as empathetic understanding. Researchers put themselves in the place of social actors and attempt to see the world through their eyes. The problem of course is whether *verstehen* produces a true picture of the actor's world view. Weber's solution to this problem will be examined shortly.

**The Protestant ethic** Weber's methodology can be illustrated with his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (see also pages 17, 19-20). Weber was interested in the meanings and motives - the 'spirit of capitalism' – which, he believed, led to the rise of capitalism. On the basis of a wide range of historical documents, he claimed that they developed from early forms of Protestantism which preceded capitalism. Weber identified a Protestant work ethic in terms of which work became a 'calling' which must be pursued with a single mind. Making money is an indication of success in one's calling, it shows that a person has not lost favour in God's sight. Weber argues that the Protestant work ethic is a major cause of the rise of capitalism.

**The comparative method** How does Weber know that his interpretation of motives – in this case the Protestant work ethic – is correct? His answer is to use the *comparative method* which compares different societies and different groups within the same society. In the absence of a laboratory in which variables can be manipulated and controlled, Weber attempts to find 'natural' laboratories which allow the influence of variables to be measured.

If Weber's interpretation of the Protestant work ethic is correct, then Protestants should have spearheaded the rise of capitalism. He produces evidence which indicates that early capitalism developed within predominantly Protestant rather than Catholic societies, and within those societies the 'business leaders and owners of capital are overwhelmingly Protestant'. From this, Weber claims that his interpretation of the motives of social actors is validated. (For further discussion of Weber's methodology, see pages 167-169).

### 3.2 Herbert Blumer – symbolic interactionism

Weber investigated meanings on a wide canvas, often drawing on information from across the world and from different time periods. Symbolic interactionists tend to focus on meanings in the context of small-scale interaction situations. From this point of view, the meanings which direct action are developed and negotiated during the process of social interaction. The job of the sociologist is to discover these meanings.

**Discovering meaning** Herbert Blumer (1962) has developed a methodology for the study of social interaction. The first step is for researchers to immerse themselves in interaction situations, to observe and interpret the actions of others and attempt to see the world through their eyes. In Blumer's words, this involves 'feeling one's way inside the experience of the actor' in order to 'catch the process of interpretation through which they construct their action'. Blumer is refreshingly honest when discussing how this might be achieved. 'It is a tough job requiring a high order of careful and honest probing, creative yet disciplined imagination, resourcefulness and flexibility in study, pondering over what one is finding, and constant readiness to test and recast one's views and images of the area.'

**Structure and meaning** Symbolic interactionists accept that to some extent social interaction is structured. Meanings are not constantly reinvented, social interaction is often routine and repetitive rather than creative and spontaneous. But this does not mean that negotiation and interpretation aren't still important aspects of interaction. Nor does it mean that human action is shaped by the structures and mechanisms of the social system, as some sociologists would argue.

Blumer gives the example of family structure and industrialisation to illustrate this point. It has been claimed that industrialisation leads to the replacement of extended families by nuclear families. Blumer objects to this view which tends to see human action as a product of structures and mechanisms. Where in the equation are the meanings people give to family life, where are the interpretations they place on industrialisation? Without these meanings and interpretations sociologists have little chance of grasping social reality.

Blumer argues that the research process must be as systematic, rigorous and objective as possible. Equally important, however, are qualities such as sensitivity and sympathy. Both the tone and substance of Blumer's methodology are a long way from many of the views of science outlined in previous sections. (For further discussion of Blumer's methodology, see pages 181-182).

### 3.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenological perspectives take the logic of a social reality to its furthest point. They argue that as human beings our only reality consists of meanings. The job of the sociologist is to discover these meanings and nothing more – for the logic of this argument states there is nothing more to discover. The methodology that results from this view will now be examined using the example of suicide.

**Discovering suicide** In *Discovering Suicide* J. Maxwell Atkinson's basic question is 'How do deaths get categorised as suicide?' When he has answered this question he can go no further because suicide is simply a

meaning and has no reality beyond this. Classifications of suicide are not right or wrong, they just are. For example, there is no such thing as a 'real' or objective suicide rate waiting to be discovered. The official statistics are the rate, full stop.

Atkinson's research attempts to discover the meanings used by coroners to classify deaths as suicide. He held discussions with coroners, attended inquests, observed a coroner's officer at work and analysed a coroner's records. He argues that coroners have a 'commonsense theory of suicide' which they use to both classify and explain deaths

as suicide. In terms of this theory, the following evidence is seen as relevant for reaching a verdict.

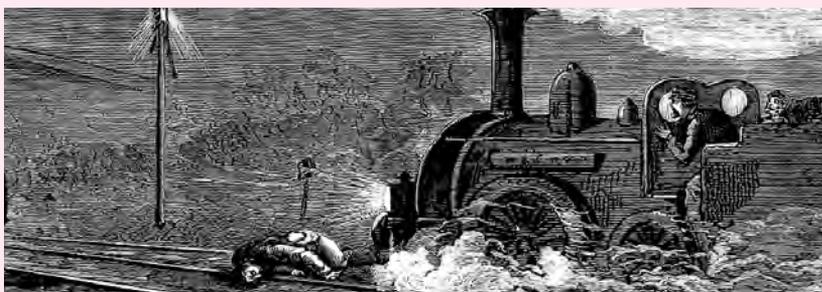
- 1 Whether suicide threats have been made or suicide notes left.
- 2 The type of death – hanging, gassing and drug overdose are seen as typical suicide deaths.
- 3 The location of death – death by gunshot at home is more likely to be seen as suicide than in the countryside where it may well be interpreted as a hunting accident.

## activity3 suicide

### Item A Suicide in 1870



SUICIDE OF TWO LOVERS BY LEAPING OVER THE TAFFRAIL OF THE AMERICAN PASSENGER SHIP "BLOOMENTHORPE" ON THE PASSAGE TO SAN LUIS.



DISTRESSING SUICIDE AFTER WARWICK RACES.

### Item B Retired coroner

During the War it was something of an understanding that you didn't bring in suicide verdicts unless you really had to. 'Bad for National Morale' – and of course I think most people felt responsible for keeping morale up. I think with suicide at that time we felt it was a kind of 'defeatism', defeatism in the face of the enemy, and that was a cardinal sin, letting the side down, you know. So when there was a verdict of suicide, lots of coroners couldn't resist reading a sermon about moral cowardice. I expect I did.

Quoted in Langley, 1988

### Item C No more suicides

Suicide has been officially abolished in the Irish Republic – not because people have stopped taking their own lives, but because coroners are forbidden to say that they did.

A decision by the High Court in Dublin last April means that verdicts of suicide cannot be brought in by coroners. As a result, the Republic has officially had a nil suicide rate since then.

This situation came about when relatives of a person recorded as having committed suicide challenged the coroner's verdict. The law has always prevented coroners from apportioning blame: verdicts on road accident victims, for example, could not say who was to blame.

The High Court ruled that this prohibition extended to suicide: coroners could not blame victims for their own deaths either.

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 4.11.1985

## questions

- 1 Use Items A, B and C to support a phenomenological view.
- 2 Do you believe there is a 'real', 'objective' suicide rate? Give reasons for your answer.

- 4 The biography of the deceased – a recent divorce, the death of a close friend or relative, a history of depression, problems at work, financial difficulties, lack of friends are seen as typical reasons for suicide.

The closer the deceased fits this commonsense theory of suicide, the more likely his or her death will be defined as suicide. In Atkinson's words, coroners 'are engaged in analysing features of the deaths and of the biographies of the deceased according to a variety of taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes a "typical suicide", "a typical suicide biography", and so on'.

Having uncovered to his satisfaction the meanings used to classify deaths as suicide, Atkinson's research is finished. There are no more questions to ask.

**Causation** As outlined in a previous section, Durkheim's research on suicide was concerned with causation, in particular with the causes of variations in suicide rates. Phenomenologists see this as a pointless and misguided exercise. Suicides are not objective 'social facts' with causes that can be explained, they are meanings. To try and discover the 'causes' of suicide will simply result in uncovering the meanings used to classify a death as suicide. Thus it comes as no surprise that the 'typical suicide biography' – the friendless, divorced loner – is very similar to Durkheim's socially isolated individual. Suicides, like any other aspect of social reality, are simply constructions of meaning.

**Conclusion** Phenomenology rejects the entire scientific enterprise as it is normally understood. It is a distortion of social reality to treat it as 'social facts', as 'things'. There are no 'structures' or 'mechanisms' operating in human society. There are no objective facts with causes which can be explained. There are only meanings to be uncovered and understood.

### 3.4 Two sociologies?

It is sometimes argued that there are 'two sociologies' (Halfpenny, 1984). The first is based on 'scientific methodology', using 'hard' quantitative data and concerned with discovering causal relationships. This approach is sometimes labelled 'positivism'. The second is based on 'interpretivist methodology', using 'soft' qualitative data and concerned with understanding the meanings which

make up social reality. This approach is sometimes labelled 'interpretivism', sometimes 'phenomenology'.

**Supporting the distinction** Some sociologists find this distinction between the two sociologies useful. They claim that there is a tendency for some researchers to adopt a positivist view and see the methods of the natural sciences as the most effective way of acquiring knowledge. And they see a real distinction between this group and those who adopt an interpretivist approach.

Those who support this distinction also claim to detect a tendency for positivists to favour certain research methods, for example survey research based on questionnaires, and certain forms of data, for example quantitative data. On the other hand, those who adopt an interpretivist approach are said to favour methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviews which are seen to produce rich, in-depth qualitative data.

These differences are seen to reflect the aims of the 'two sociologies'. Positivism aims to discover cause and effect relationships. This requires quantitative data so that the strength of relationships between variables can be measured. Interpretivism aims to understand human action. This requires rich, qualitative data in order to discover the meanings which lie behind action.

**Opposing the distinction** Ray Pawson (1989) rejects this view of the 'two sociologies'. He argues that it gives a false

### key terms

**Interpretivist sociology** A range of theoretical perspectives which emphasise the importance of meanings for understanding human action.

**Verstehen** A term used by Weber for interpreting motives. Roughly translated it means empathetic understanding – ie, attempting to understand motives by putting yourself in the actor's place.

**Comparative method** Comparing different societies, and different groups within the same society.

**Phenomenology** A view which states that phenomena – things or events – must be studied in their own right, not as representing something else. Thus, meanings must be studied as meanings – they have no other reality.

### summary

1. Interpretivist perspectives emphasise the importance of meanings for understanding social action.
2. However, there are important differences between interpretivist perspectives. Some look for causal explanations of social action, others seek only to discover the meanings used to construct social reality.
3. Some sociologists make a distinction between two sociologies – positivism and interpretivism. They argue that these sociologies differ in terms of theory and methodology.
4. Other sociologists argue that this distinction is false. They see sociology as far more varied in terms of theory and methodology than the idea of two sociologies suggests.

picture of the relationship between theory, research methods and the actual practice of doing sociology.

Pawson describes the idea of 'two sociologies' as a 'methodological myth'.

In other words, the two sociologies don't exist. Instead, there is a whole range of different views, different assumptions and different methodologies. As previous

sections have shown, there are various views of science and its application to the study of human society. And sociologists who are primarily concerned with meanings use a variety of research methods and types of data and often start from different theoretical perspectives. This variety cannot be reduced to 'two sociologies'.

## Unit 4 Postmodernist methodology

### key issues

- 1 How does postmodernism challenge sociological research methodology?
- 2 What alternatives does it offer?

### The challenge

Postmodernists directly challenge the entire basis of research methodology in the social sciences. They reject the whole idea of collecting data to support or reject hypotheses or theories. They question the possibility of making any definite statements about social reality. They reject the idea that there is an objective reality 'out there' waiting to be discovered. They argue that the 'facts' and 'knowledge' that fill sociological research reports and textbooks are nothing of the sort. They are simply sociologists' constructions of reality rather than a valid description and analysis of the social world 'out there'.

The following discussion of postmodernist methodology is largely based on Mats Alvesson's excellent book *Postmodernism and Social Research* (2002).

### A postmodernist view of reality

From a postmodernist perspective, any description, analysis, view or picture of the social world is simply one view amongst many. And this applies to sociologists as much as anybody else.

Nothing is certain – everything is tentative, doubtful, indeterminate. Take yourself. In one sense you are one person, in another sense you are lots of people. In one sense you have one identity, in another sense you are made up of multiple identities. In various situations you adopt different identities, see things in different ways, operate with different meanings. What you see or say in one situation may contradict what you see or say in another situation.

This applies both to the sociologist and those who participate in his or her research. Nothing is fixed, everything is fluid; nothing is whole, everything is fragmented; there is no single reality, only multiple realities.

### Objectivity and research

Sociologists aim to be objective, to present the social world of those they are studying as it really is, to give us the 'facts'. Many sociologists accept that complete objectivity is an ideal that is unattainable. However, they do their best to get there. And they believe their research reports are a lot better than the view of the person in the street.

From a postmodernist view, research reports are not objective. Instead, they are constructions which are designed to persuade, to give the impression of rational, analytic thinking, and to convince the reader that the researcher's view is 'the truth'. And often, the persuasion works. In the words of Mats Alvesson (2002),

'This is made possible through the skilful denial of any relevance of the pre-structured understanding of the researcher, his or her class, gender, nationality, his or her paradigmatic, theoretical and political preferences and biases, the vocabularies employed, the dynamics of the research process, the expectations and more or less politically skilled operations of the informants, the more or less arbitrary decisions about informants, the selective presentation of evidence and rhetorical tricks and conventions of writing.'

Sociologists are a bit like conjurers. They deceive, they play tricks, they create illusions. For example, they skilfully present an illusion of objectivity where none exists.

### Sociological categories

Think of the following terms – culture, subculture, norm, value, social class, ethnicity, social structure, social status, social role. These are all categories used by sociologists to order, organise and make sense of the social world. According to postmodernists, the social world is forced into these categories, wedged into these pigeonholes. In this respect, the social world becomes a construction built by sociologists. In this way, researchers impose their own order and framework on the social world.

From a postmodernist viewpoint, the social world is ambiguous rather than clear-cut, fluid rather than fixed, open rather than closed. It cannot be rammed into fixed, predetermined categories.

Is there any alternative to researchers imposing their reality on the social world? Do they have to make sense of human action by using pre-set categories?

**Categories as problematic** A starting point is to see all categories as problematic, to be aware that they create order where none may exist, that they impose a particular view of reality, that they structure the social world in a particular way.

**Defamiliarisation** This offers the possibility of getting away from a sociological construction of the social world.

*Defamiliarisation* means looking at the familiar in new and novel ways. Instead of assuming human action is natural, rational, patterned, ordered, the observer should try and see it from other viewpoints – as exotic, random, irrational, contradictory, arbitrary, crazy. For example, look back on your schooldays and family life and try and look at them in a fresh and novel way – for example, as an alien from another planet or somebody from the distant past or future.

### Multiple interpretations

Postmodernists are particularly scathing and dismissive of *metanarratives* – literally ‘big stories’ such as Marxism and functionalism which offer a single explanation, a single perspective on social reality. Metanarratives have their own set of categories, their own vocabulary (or jargon), they are based on particular values, they define the social world in a particular way, and they wrap it all up in a neat, tidy, rigid framework. A metanarrative is a total package into which all social reality can be accommodated.

But if you buy into one metanarrative, that’s all you get. All your research will be coloured by it. What you look for, how you interpret it, will be guided by the big story you believe.

From a postmodernist viewpoint, there are multiple, if not infinite, interpretations of the social world. Who is to say which is ‘right’ or the ‘best’?

Where does this take us? Some would say nowhere – what’s the point of doing research if it’s no better or worse than any other view – for example, no better or worse than the view of the journalist, novelist, comedian, child, grandparent, Christian, Muslim or Jew?

### key terms

**Defamiliarisation** Looking at the familiar in new and novel ways.

**Metanarratives** Big stories or pictures of how the world works. Grand theories produced by the natural and social sciences.

**Multiple interpretations** Looking at the social world from different vantage points and in terms of different perspectives.

For some, there is a halfway house. Sociologists should be more humble. They should accept the idea of *multiple interpretations*. They should look at the social world from different vantage points, in terms of different perspectives. And they should allow other voices to be heard in their research publications, particularly the voices of those they are researching.

### Evaluation

Much of what postmodernists have to say about sociological methodology is negative. Taken to its extreme, it suggests that sociological research is a waste of time. Worse, it can be seen as an illusion which distorts the social world and deceives the audience.

But have postmodernists got it right? Using their arguments, there’s no way of judging whether they’re right or wrong. The voice of postmodernism is simply one voice amongst many – neither better nor worse.

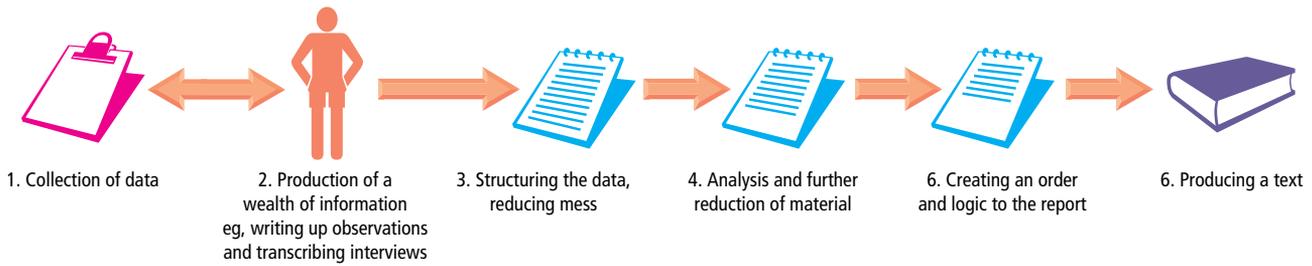
Despite this criticism, postmodernism has made sociologists more aware of the problems and pitfalls of research. It has made many researchers more sensitive, more questioning and more humble. Mats Alvesson (2002) presents the following evaluation. Postmodernism ‘offers a challenge and an inspiration to revise and make qualitative research more sophisticated and creative. This is not bad, and a strong reason for taking it seriously. But not too seriously.’

### summary

1. From a postmodernist perspective, any description or analysis of the social world is simply one view amongst many.
2. As a result, it is not possible to make any definite statements about social reality. Sociological research is not, and cannot be, objective.
3. Researchers impose their own order and framework on the social world by using pre-set categories.
4. Researchers should regard all categories as problematic. And they should defamiliarise themselves from the social world in order to open their eyes to a variety of interpretations.
5. Postmodernists reject metanarratives, arguing they should be replaced by multiple interpretations of the social world.
6. Using their own arguments, there is no way of judging whether postmodernists are right or wrong.
7. Postmodernism has made sociologists more aware of the problems and pitfalls of research. And it has encouraged them to be more creative and innovative.

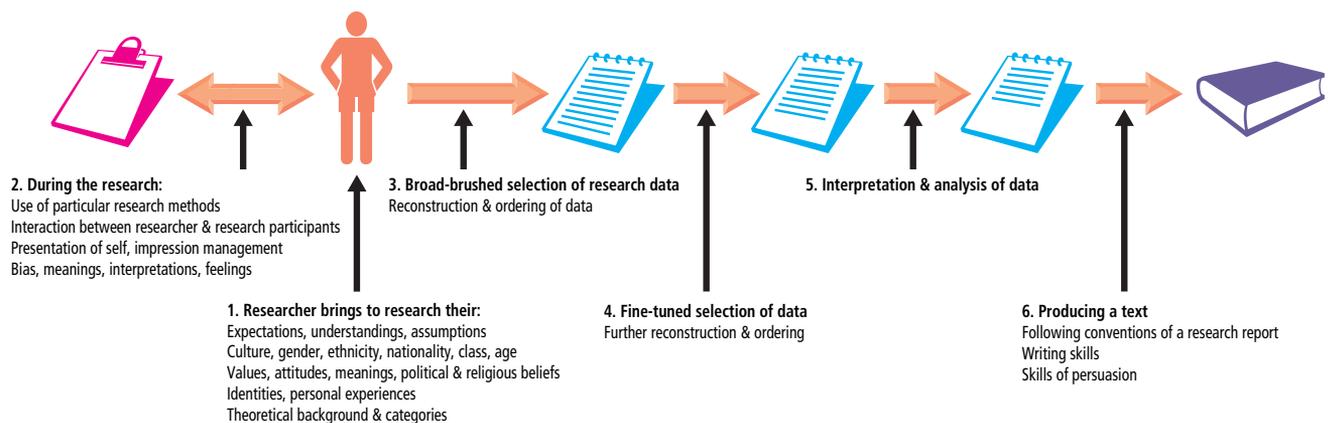
## activity4 postmodernism and research

### Item A The research process – a simple version



Adapted from Alvesson, 2002

### Item B The research process – a complex version



Adapted from Alvesson, 2002

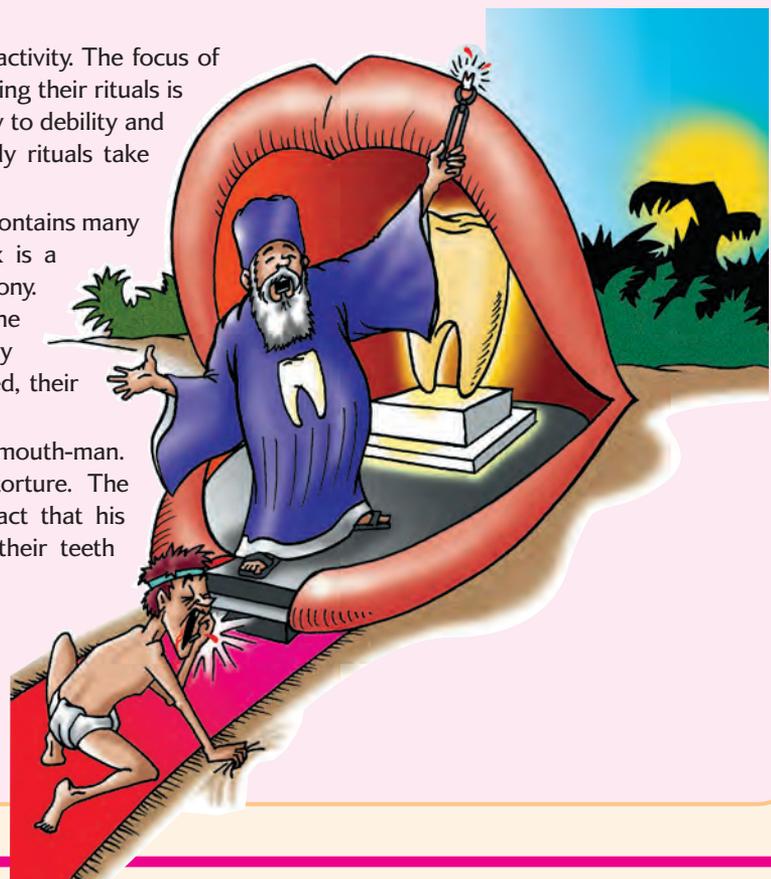
### Item C Body ritual among the Nacirema

The Nacirema spend a large part of the day in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body. The basic belief underlying their rituals is that the human body is ugly and has a natural tendency to debility and disease. Every household has a shrine where the body rituals take place.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which contains many charms and magical potions. Beneath the charm-box is a small font where they perform the daily mouth ceremony. The Nacirema have a horror of and fascination with the mouth. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their friends desert them and their lovers reject them.

Once or twice a year, the Nacirema seek out a holy-mouth-man. The ceremony involves almost unbelievable ritual torture. The power of the holy-mouth-man is evident from the fact that his clients return year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

Adapted from Miner, 1965



## questions

- 1 Research is not as simple and straightforward as it seems. Comment on this statement from a postmodernist view with some reference to Items A and B.
- 2 Item B is an adapted extract from an article by Horace Miner, an American anthropologist. Nacirema is American spelt backwards.
  - a) How is this description an example of defamiliarisation?
  - b) Do you find it useful?
  - c) Write a brief defamiliarised description of an aspect of everyday behaviour.

## Unit 5 Feminist methodology

### key issues

- 1 What is feminist methodology?
- 2 What contribution has it made to sociology?

Over the past 30 years 'women's studies' has become a major growth industry. In university bookshops, shelves are stacked with books about women and their place in history and society. And most of these books are written by women.

What does this mean? Clearly it means that women are seen as more important than before. The growth of women's studies can be seen as a reflection of the rise of feminism and changes in perceptions of women's roles in Western society. There is little doubt that social change and the changes in values which accompany it influence choices about what to study. For many feminists, however, the effects of these changes are a lot more fundamental than simply choice of subject matter.

### 5.1 Feminism – the weak thesis

Ray Pawson (1992) distinguishes between the 'weak thesis' and the 'strong thesis' of feminist methods. In terms of the 'weak thesis', research methods in sociology are essentially sound. The problem is that in practice they are shot through with sexism. The solution is to purge them of sexism. Eichler's *Non-Sexist Research Methods* (1988) is an example of this approach. She identifies major areas of sexism which infuse the research process. These include:

**Androcentricity** This means viewing the world from a traditional male perspective, with its assumptions of male dominance and superiority – for example – seeing women as passive objects rather than active subjects. As a result, women are largely 'invisible' – in Sheila Rowbotham's (1973) words, they are 'hidden from history'.

**Overgeneralisation** Many studies deal only with men but present their findings as though they applied to both men and women. For example, until recently social mobility

studies in Britain were based solely on men. Since women's social status was seen to derive from the status of their husbands, there seemed little point in looking at women in their own right. Their class position could be simply 'read off' from the position of their husband.

### Research methods

According to Eichler, the sexist assumptions outlined above are found in all aspects of the research process. This can be seen from her examples of questions taken from questionnaires. The first is an example of a sex specific term when talking about people in general.

- If someone wanted to make a speech in your community claiming that Blacks are inferior, should he be allowed to speak or not?

The next question reflects common assumptions about male dominance.

- Is it acceptable for women to hold important political offices in state and national government? Yes/No.

The solution is to reformulate the questions in a non-sexist way.

Eichler's argument suggests reform rather than radical change. Research methods, in and of themselves, are not sexist. Once researchers learn to use them in a non-sexist way, then the problem will be solved.

### 5.2 Feminism – the strong thesis

The changes advocated by the strong thesis are more fundamental. Something of their flavour is provided by Ann Oakley's article 'Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms' (1981).

#### Feminist interviewing

Oakley (1981) argues that the standard approach to interviewing has the following characteristics. '(a) its status as a mechanical instrument of data-collection; (b) its function as a specialised form of conversation in which one person asks the questions and another gives the answers; (c) its characterisation of interviewees as

essentially passive individuals and (d) its reduction of interviewers to a question asking and rapport-promoting role’.

Oakley sees this approach as clinical, manipulative, exploitive and hierarchical. The interviewer ‘uses’ the respondent for ‘his’ purposes, controlling the content and direction of the interview. The relationship is unequal – the interviewer takes and the respondent gives. A feminist methodology would replace this by a non-hierarchical relationship, with the researcher giving as well as receiving. For example, an interviewer must ‘be prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship’ which means honesty, sincerity, understanding and compassion between equals. It means that both parties have a say in the content and direction of the interview. Only with this personal involvement will ‘people come to know each other and admit others into their lives’.

This example argues for a change in research methods – a new type of interviewing – rather than simply cleansing existing methods of sexism. It argues that research techniques are so imbued with male assumptions and practices that they must be radically changed. These changes are not only morally correct, they will also result in better data.

One reaction to Oakley’s views is summed up by Ray Pawson’s (1992) query, ‘What’s new?’. There is a long tradition of interviewing which emphasises sensitivity and non-directive approaches. Whether Oakley’s views are significantly different from this is questionable.

### Gender politics and methodology

Some feminists argue that the ‘women’s struggle’ and feminist methodology are inseparable. ‘Malestream’ sociology is so saturated with assumptions of male dominance that a feminist alternative is required. Maria Mies (1993) provides an example of this approach. She argues that a feminist methodology must have the following features.

- 1 **Conscious partiality** The idea of so-called value free research has to be replaced by conscious partiality, which in practice means that female researchers must positively identify with the women they study.
- 2 **View from below** This replaces the ‘view from above’, with its assumptions of male dominance, which supports the existing power structure. Researchers must take the ‘view from below’ because it is more likely to reflect women’s experiences and more likely to empower women in their struggle for liberation.
- 3 **Action research** Rather than being a detached spectator, a dispassionate observer, the researcher should actively participate in the struggle for women’s liberation.
- 4 **Changing the status quo** From this involvement in their own emancipation, both researchers and the women they study will develop a better understanding of their situation. This is based on the idea, ‘If you want to

know a thing, you must t change it’. Only by challenging and changing patriarchy will its true nature be revealed.

- 5 **Raising consciousness** Both researchers and the researched must raise their consciousness – become aware of their oppression. In particular, it is the job of the researcher to give women the means to gain insight into and change their situation.
- 6 **Individual and social history** Part of the process of raising consciousness requires a study of women’s individual and social history. This will allow women to reclaim their history from its appropriation by men.
- 7 **Collectivising experience** Women must collectivise their experience and join together and cooperate in their struggle for liberation. They must overcome the individualism, competitiveness and careerism which characterise the male world.

In terms of these propositions, Maria Mies is claiming that valid knowledge can only emerge from the struggles waged by the oppressed against their oppressors. The journey to truth involves just the opposite of value freedom. In Mies’s case it requires a wholehearted commitment to women’s liberation.

Mies’s views are not new. Marxists have produced similar arguments for the liberation of the working class, as have African Americans for Black liberation in the USA. Whatever the virtues of this point of view, it is unlikely to offer a recipe for sociology as a whole since there is more to human society than oppressors and oppressed.

### 5.3 The primacy of experience

A number of feminists have argued that the only way to know something is to experience it. Given this, it is crucial for feminist research to capture the experience of women and to express it as directly as possible with a minimum of reinterpretation on the part of the researcher.

Too often researchers see the experience of others in terms of their own values and preconceptions. In particular, they force this experience into theoretical frameworks and categories which only serve to distort it. This argument was put forcibly by Kaluzynska (1980) when she rejected the whole Marxist debate about domestic labour – whether it was ‘productive’ or ‘non-productive’, whether it created ‘surplus value’, whether it was ‘alienating’ and so on. She objects to the imposition of concepts which, she argues, distort the experience of housework. In her words, ‘Why did we have to get to grips with value theory to appreciate what a drag housework was?’.

There are, however, problems with giving primacy to personal experience. It makes the assumption that if we dig hard enough and deep enough we’ll get to the ‘real thing’ – the direct experience of others. But, as the section on reflexivity indicated, recording the experience of others will always to some degree be coloured by the values and theoretical concepts of the researcher.

## 5.4 Postmodern feminism

### Women as a category

Feminism is not a single perspective. In its early days, things were fairly simple. Women were the oppressed, men were the oppressors, the target was patriarchy, the aim to liberate women. There was a tendency to see women as a single, undifferentiated category. Groups of women objected to this approach – for example, Black women and lesbian women. OK, they were women, but, they argued, their experiences and social situation distinguished them from women in general. As a result, many of the generalisations about women did not apply, or only partly applied, to them.

Postmodern feminism takes this argument a step further. It rejects the standard feminist metanarrative ('grand story') of women as a homogeneous, undifferentiated category, faced with an oppressive patriarchal system. And it even rejects categories which subdivide the category 'women', such as Black women, lesbian women and working-class women. Instead, postmodern feminists emphasise diversity and variation. They argue that researchers should be open to this diversity rather than approaching it with pre-set, preconceived categories.

**Evaluation** This approach has been criticised by a number of feminists. Breaking down or rejecting the category 'women' prevents the possibility of making generalisations which apply to most or all women. It also blunts the force of feminist protest and threatens the unity of women as a group. Emphasising variation and uniqueness may lead to 'divide and conquer', so serving male dominance (Alvesson, 2002).

### The research process

**Research as a construct** Postmodern feminists favour interpretivist research methods such as participant observation. They are particularly aware that the results of research are a social construct – they are largely constructed by the researcher from fieldnotes which document their observations. This awareness leads them to revisit, reopen and reinterpret their fieldnotes. As Sara Delamont (2003) states,

'fieldnotes are not a closed, completed, final text: rather, they are indeterminate, subject to reading, rereading, coding, recording, interpreting, reinterpreting.'

This is in line with the postmodernist view that there are multiple interpretations of any observation.

**Multiple voices** As outlined in Unit 4, postmodernists argue that researchers should allow the voices of those they research to be heard. Again, in Sara Delamont's (2003) words, this means 'the text will reproduce the actors' own perspectives and experiences. This may include extended biographical and autobiographical accounts, extended dialogues between the researcher and informants, and other "documents of life". Typically, there is an emphasis

on the kinds of narratives or stories through which social actors construct their own and others' experiences.'

**Reflexivity** The researcher's own voice should be heard loud and clear, expressing her or his thoughts and feelings about the research. This will be a reflexive voice, reflecting on the research process, the author's interpretations, emotions and relationships with the research participants. This reflects the researcher's awareness that they are a part of the social world they are researching, that the results of their research may say as much, if not more, about them as about the research participants they are studying.

**Presenting research** Postmodernists' focus on multiple identities and multiple interpretations is reflected in their writing styles. Descriptions of social action and social scenes vary from 'cold' to 'hot', from dispassionate to passionate, from clinical to evocative. There is a mix of styles from poetic to descriptive, from the researcher's words to those of the research participants. The intention is to allow the reader to move through a variety of interpretations and observe from a variety of standpoints (Delamont, 2003).

### key terms

**Androcentricity** A male-centred view of the world which assumes male superiority and dominance.

**Overgeneralisation** Generalising further than the evidence allows. For example, generalising from a male sample to both males and females.

**Conscious partiality** Positively identifying with and favouring a particular group.

**Multiple voices** Many voices. In this case, it refers to the view that many voices should be heard in the research report.

### summary

1. There are a number of feminist methodologies.
2. The 'weak thesis' states that androcentricity and overgeneralisation are found in all aspects of the research process.
3. Research methods, in and of themselves, are not sexist. Once researchers learn to use them in a non-sexist way, the problem will be solved.
4. The 'strong thesis' states that feminism requires its own research methods – for example, feminist interviewing.
5. Some feminists see the women's struggle and feminist methodology as inseparable. The feminist researcher should be consciously partial and actively participate in women's liberation.
6. Postmodern feminism rejects pre-set, pre-determined categories. It emphasises diversity and variation.
7. It argues that there are multiple interpretations of any observation and that this should be reflected by multiple voices in research reports.

## Conclusion

Sociology used to be a male subject, run by males and concerned with males. Women were largely absent from sociology departments and in a minority among research participants. When sociologists studied workers, they usually studied male workers. When they studied social mobility, it was men who went up and down the class system – women didn't even make it into the supposedly representative sample. And women's concerns and issues were unlikely to be heard and researched.

Thanks in large part to feminists, women now feature in every area of sociology – as workers, members of ethnic minorities, as voters, as students, as mothers and housewives, as participants in the class system and as

members of religious organisations. Women are no longer invisible.

The research process has been largely cleansed of sexism. Researchers are increasingly aware that sexism will produce invalid results.

Feminists have been in the forefront of recent developments in methodology. Many have argued that sociology is not, should not and cannot be value free. They have emphasised the importance of capturing the experience of research participants and of expressing that experience directly. They have argued that emotion has an important part to play in the research process. And they have opened up, questioned, and presented alternatives to, established research methodology.

## activity5 feminism and methodology

### Item A Sexist questionnaires

A study of the lifestyles of adolescent girls and boys included sets of questions about the roles they might identify with (Murdock & Phelps, 1973). Both girls and boys were given a list of roles to choose from, which included 'good pupil', 'rebel', 'good friend' and 'pop fan'. Boys were given a separate list which included 'sports fan' and 'natural leader'. Girls were also given their own list with roles such as 'homemaker' and 'fashion follower'. The girls had no opportunity of choosing from the boys' options and the boys' had no opportunity of choosing from the girls' options.

Adapted from Jones, 1974

### Item B Woman-to-woman

Janet Finch describes herself as a feminist sociologist. She conducted two studies based on in-depth interviews in which all the interviewees were women – 1) clergyman's wives and 2) women who used and ran preschool playgroups. She talked to the women in their own homes about marriage, motherhood and childbearing.



She preferred a woman-to-woman discussion in an informal setting 'on both methodological and political grounds'. In her view 1) it works better and 2) it's morally better. Finch found that she gained their trust because she was a woman and because, as a feminist, she treated them as equals. Sharing their gender, both parties shared a subordinate position in society and, as a result, were likely to identify with each other. And, in an equal relationship, the interviewees felt they could talk freely. The women welcomed the interviews and were enthusiastic during the discussions.

As a feminist sociologist, Finch was 'on the side' of the women she studied. In her words, this 'inevitably means an emotional as well as an intellectual commitment to promoting their interests'. Does this bias her research? No more than any other research, since, in her view, 'all social science knowledge is intrinsically political in character'.

Adapted from Finch, 1993

## questions

- 1 a) How can the questions in Item A be seen as sexist?  
b) How might the results of this study simply reproduce traditional gender stereotypes?
- 2 a) In what ways does Finch's woman-to-woman interviewing style reflect Oakley's 'feminist interviewing'?  
b) What are the advantages of this style of interviewing?

## Unit 6 Sociology, methodology and values

### key issues

- 1 Is an objective, value-free sociology possible?
- 2 Is it desirable?

What we see, the questions we ask and the way we interpret data are influenced by a range of social and personal factors. They include our class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture and our personalities, experiences and life histories. These points will now be developed, focusing on the influence of values on social research.

Values are strongly held beliefs about what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is worth fighting for and fighting against, what is worth having and not having, who is worthy of respect and support and who is not.

Can the research process in particular and sociology in general be *value free*? And, going one step further, is a value-free sociology desirable?

The founding fathers of sociology believed that an objective, value-free science of society was both possible and desirable. Despite their many differences, not least in terms of personal values, Comte, Marx and Durkheim each believed his work to be uncontaminated by value judgements. Today's sociologists are a lot less certain. A brief look at the debate about values and the study of deviance illustrates this.

### 6.1 Values and the study of deviance

In an article entitled 'Whose Side Are We On?' the American sociologist Howard Becker (1970) argues that it is impossible to conduct research 'uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies'. Becker's sympathies lie with the underdog, those who have been labelled deviant. He is critical of the agents of social control who, in his eyes, create deviance by selectively applying labels to the poor and powerless (see page 234). Becker argues that not only the research process but the theories which lie behind it – in his case interactionism – are infused with value judgements. From his standpoint 'interactionist theories look (and are) rather left'.

Like Becker, the American sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1975) believes that a value-free sociology is impossible. However, his values are a lot further to the left than Becker's. From his standpoint, Gouldner accuses the interactionists of adopting a 'bland liberal position' (liberalism advocates reform within the existing structure rather than radical social change). A more radical position would lead to a critical examination of the relationship between deviance and the unequal distribution of power in society.

Gouldner pictures Becker and his interactionist

colleagues as White middle-class liberals who 'get their kicks' from a 'titillated attraction to the underdog's exotic difference'. Their sympathies result in no more than mild criticism of the agents of social control. Their bland liberalism prevents a radical critique of the structure of social inequality which creates deviance.

Gouldner argues that values underlie every sociological perspective. And these values influence the way sociologists picture and explain the social world.

**Functionalism** has often been seen as reflecting a conservative position which advocates the maintenance of the status quo – the way things are. In doing so, it is seen to justify existing social structures. With its view that order, stability and consensus are essential for the smooth running of society and its emphasis on the positive functions of social institutions, it implies that radical change is harmful to society.

Alvin Gouldner (1971) argues that in terms of the logic of functionalism, 'only "evil" – social disorder, tension or conflict – can come from efforts to remove the domination of man by man or make fundamental changes in the character of authority'.

**Marxism** The values which underlie Marxism are plain for all to see. Marx was committed to socialism. His vision of communism is utopian – a perfect society. He looked forward to an egalitarian society free from the evils of capitalism – free from oppression, exploitation and alienation, with wealth and power shared by all rather than concentrated in the hands of the few. And it is partly in terms of this vision that Marxists see capitalist society. For example, J.C. Kincaid's (1973) solution to poverty states, 'Poverty cannot be abolished in a capitalist society but only in a socialist society under workers' control, in which human needs and not profits determine the allocation of resources'. Marxism replaces the functionalist commitment to the status quo with a commitment to revolutionary change.

### 6.2 Sociological theory and values

**Feminism** The previous unit looked at feminist methodology and made the point that most feminist researchers argue that sociology is not, should not, and cannot be value free.

Many feminists wear their hearts and values on their sleeves. They place a high value on gender equality. They regard the present system of patriarchy as unjust and oppressive. They identify with the women they study and seek to empower them in their struggle for liberation. Patriarchy is wrong – the injustices of the system must be spelt out as a first step to overthrowing it.

Feminist research is directed by values which define what is right and wrong and what should be done.

## 6.3 The question of relativism

If we accept that to some degree value judgements underlie all sociological perspectives, where does this leave the search for 'truth'? Since all perspectives are value based it can be argued that there is no way – apart from our own value judgements – of deciding whether one is superior to another. Some would agree with this argument. They would take a *relativist* position, seeing all knowledge as relative. In terms of this view, there is no such thing as objective knowledge since everything is seen through the lens of our values and culture.

Others argue that just because a perspective is based on values does not necessarily negate its insights and its findings. Taking a relativist view is like dismissing the research findings of Greenpeace and the nuclear industry simply because of the differing values and vested interests of those organisations. And since any view of society can only be partial, differing perspectives in sociology may add breadth to that view. It is this breadth that allows Melvin Tumin (1967) to make the following statement about social stratification. 'The evidence regarding the mixed outcomes of stratification strongly suggests the examination of alternatives. The evidence regarding the possibilities of social growth under conditions of more equal rewarding is such that the exploration of alternatives seems eminently worthwhile.' And here Tumin is referring to evidence produced from a variety of sociological perspectives.

### Views of reality

At one extreme, there is the position that objectivity and value freedom are possible. At the other extreme, all knowledge is seen as relative and there is no way of deciding between opposing views of reality. The most radical version of relativism rejects any possibility of objective knowledge, seeing in its place only subjective experience. In this respect, there is no reality outside human perception. What we see is what there is and there is nothing else.

Few, if any, sociologists accept this position – if they did there would be little point in doing sociology. Here is an elegant rejection of relativism by Julia O'Connell Davidson and Derek Layder (1994).

'But the idea that there is no reality separate from the conceptual systems employed by people to grasp it accords quite ludicrous powers to human thought (Trigg, 1989). A tree that falls in a forest falls regardless of whether a person is there to witness and conceptualise the event, children in Somalia die of starvation regardless of whether the governments of the Western world believe that they are providing adequate aid. Many people in Britain and the United States fondly imagine that they live in a meritocratic, post-racist, post-sexist society, but this does not mean that a working-class child or a Black child or a female child is truly blessed with the same chances of obtaining wealth and social power as the middle-class, White, male child. Of course one person's freedom fighter

is another person's terrorist. And of course you can never know with absolute certainty that another person understands what you say in exactly the same way that you understand it. And of course language, concepts and beliefs affect our perception of social reality. But this does not mean that there really is no solid world out there separate from human beings' concepts and beliefs. In practice, as King Canute is purported to have discovered, the object world has a nasty habit of intruding no matter what people may believe about it.'

### key terms

**Value-free research** Research that is free from the values of the researcher. Research that is objective.

**Relativism** The idea that there can be no objective, value-free knowledge.

### summary

1. There is evidence to suggest that values underlie every aspect of the sociological enterprise from the gathering of data to the construction of theories.
2. It can be argued that feminism, functionalism, Marxism and other theories are, at least in part, value based.
3. A relativist position states that an objective, value-free sociology is impossible. Carried to its extreme, this means that there is no way of judging whether research findings are valid or invalid.
4. Many sociologists, while accepting that a value-free sociology is not possible, still retain the ideal of objectivity. This means that research which is rigorous, systematic and reflexive is better than research which is sloppy, unsystematic and uncritical.

## activity6 thinking about values

### Item A Taking sides

To have values or not to have values: the question is always with us. When sociologists undertake to study problems that have relevance to the world we live in, they find themselves caught in a crossfire. Some urge them not to take sides, to be neutral and do research that is technically correct and value free. Others tell them their work is shallow and useless if it does not express a deep commitment to a value position.

This dilemma, which seems so painful to so many, actually does not exist; for one of its horns is imaginary. For it to exist, one would have to assume, as some apparently do, that it is indeed possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies. I propose to argue that it is not possible and, therefore that the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather on whose side we are on.

Adapted from Becker, 1970

### Item B Better ways of conducting research

Social researchers draw on their everyday knowledge and on their political and moral values in the process of research; they use them to set the research agenda and to design classification systems; they use their social, as well as professional, skills to obtain information; they employ their knowledge as members of society and their political values to analyse and interpret their findings. But accepting this inevitable and indissoluble link between scientific and everyday thinking and between social theories and moral and political values does not make critical investigation impossible. As Geertz (1973, p30) comments in relation to ethnographic and anthropological work:

'I have never been impressed by the argument that, as complete objectivity is impossible ... one might as well let one's sentiments run loose. As Robert Solow has remarked, that is like saying that as a perfectly aseptic (germ free) environment is impossible, one might as well conduct surgery in a sewer.'

Research that is rigorous and reflexive produces knowledge that is more objective than research which is sloppy and uncritical. Researchers who, as well as being technically competent, consider the impact of their own gender, 'racialised' and class identity upon the research process and who understand that research is itself a form of social interaction will produce a more reliable picture of the social world. In short, there are better and worse ways of conducting research.

From O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994

### Item C The value of money – a Blackfoot view

One day White men came into our camp to buy our land for dollar bills and put us on reservations with other Indians.

When the White chief had laid all of his money down on the ground and shown how much he would give all of us for signing a treaty with him, our chief took a handful of clay and made a ball of it and put it on the fire and cooked it. And it did not crack. Then he said to the White chief:

'Now, give me some of your money; we will put the money on the fire and the clay alongside of it, and whichever burns the quickest is the cheapest.'

The White chief said:

'My money will burn the quickest, because it is made of paper; so we can't do that.'

Our chief then reached down into his belt pocket and took out a little buckskin bag of sand, and he handed it to the White chief, and said: 'Give me your money. I will count the money, while you count the grains of sand. Whichever can be counted the quickest will be the cheapest.'

The White chief took the sand and poured it out into the palm of his hand, and as he looked at it, he said:

'I would not live long enough to count this, but you can count the money quickly.'

'Then,' our chief said, 'our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun

shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals; therefore we cannot sell this land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit, and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us. You can count your money and burn it within the nod of a buffalo's head, but only the Great Spirit can count the grains of sand and the blades of grass on these plains. As a present to you, we will give you anything we have that you can take with you; but the land, never.'

From Long Lance, 1956



Blackfoot Indians performing a religious ceremony

**Item D King Canute***King Canute ordering the waves to go back***questions**

- 1 Do you agree with Becker's view in Item A? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 'There are better and worse ways of conducting research.' Discuss with reference to Item B.
- 3 It is useful to look at social life from a variety of standpoints and vantage points. Discuss with some reference to Item C.
- 4 How does the cartoon in Item D support O'Connell Davidson's and Layder's rejection of relativism? (See page 148.)

**Unit 7 Sociology and social policy****key issues**

- 1 What is the relationship between sociology and social policy?
- 2 To what extent has sociology influenced governments in recent years?

Social policy refers to government policy on a range of social issues – for example, education, the family and poverty. Have sociologists a contribution to make? After all, they study these areas. Should they be consulted by government and join the working parties which shape social policy? Or, should they stand apart from government, criticising social policy and developing alternatives to existing policy?

**7.1 The founding fathers**

Many of the founding fathers believed that sociology had a central part to play in society – in reforming social institutions, solving social problems and improving the human condition.

**Auguste Comte (1798-1857)** Comte saw sociology as a practical subject. It shouldn't remain in the universities, it should be applied to the wider society. Comte believed in order and progress – he saw sociology providing the ideas to reinforce social order and direct social progress. In his words, the purpose of sociology is 'to know, in order to predict, in order to control'.

**Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)** Like Comte, Durkheim focused on the question of order in society. He was concerned with the political upheaval and civil unrest which he believed resulted from industrialisation and a breakdown of value consensus. He saw sociology as providing ways of restoring order and strengthening the integration of society.

Durkheim believed that sociology pointed to a need for a new moral order in industrial society, whereby people would be bound together by a sense of duty and obligation to the community as a whole.

**Karl Marx (1818-1883)** Where Durkheim saw sociologists working with governments to improve existing societies, Marx looked forward to the overthrow of governments and their replacement with communist societies.

Marx hoped that his work would inspire and direct working-class movements in capitalist societies. However, it was only after his death that his ideas shaped history. For example, Lenin's interpretation of Marxism provided a practical framework for the establishment of a communist state after the Russian Revolution of 1917.

**Sociologists today** Today's sociologists tend to be a lot less ambitious than the founding fathers. Many feel that sociology can make important contributions to social policy. However, they tend to see these contributions as limited to specific areas such as family policy or education policy. They are unlikely to see sociological ideas or research findings reforming society as a whole, as Durkheim hoped, or spearheading revolutionary change as Marx anticipated.

## 7.2 Shaping social policy

Before looking in detail at the relationship between sociology and social policy, it is important to have some indication of the factors which shape social policy.

David Donnison, one of the UK's leading experts on poverty, makes the following points about how social policy is shaped.

'As in all debates about important issues of social policy, the questions posed and the concepts used in debates about poverty are shaped partly by changing circumstances and growing knowledge, but also by the changing political agendas of the societies concerned.'  
(Donnison, 2001)

**Changing circumstances** Societies change. To some extent social policy is shaped by changes in society. This is illustrated by the following example.

The aftermath of a war often brings changes. People have made great sacrifices, their lives have been disrupted and they are often not prepared to accept their old status – they want something better. This can be seen in the expansion of social services after the First World War (1914-1918) when the then Prime Minister, Lloyd George, promised the troops 'homes fit for heroes'.

During the Second World War (1939-1945) a committee chaired by Sir William Beveridge produced the famous *Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Published in 1942, it became an immediate bestseller. Popular support for its principles was widespread both at home and among the troops abroad. Its recommendations appeared to embody the very things being fought for – democracy, freedom and equality.

The Beveridge Report's recommendations were put into effect by a series of Acts from 1944 to 1948. Together they created the modern welfare state in the UK.

**Growing knowledge** Social policy is also shaped by a growth in knowledge. The following evidence illustrates this point.

During the 19th century, the dominant view of poverty

saw it resulting from some form of character defect – the poor lacked moral fibre, they were work-shy, lazy and idle. In other words, the poor were to blame for their poverty (Page, 2001).

In 1899, Seebohm Rowntree conducted a systematic study of poverty in York. In terms of his definition of poverty – insufficient food, fuel and clothing to maintain good health – 28% of York's population were poor. In many cases, there was no evidence of individual blame. In some cases, the breadwinner's wages were simply too low to keep the family out of poverty. And in other cases, people were too old or sick to work.

Research such as this influenced governments. For example, Liberal governments in the early 1900s were increasingly likely to see poverty as a social rather than an individual problem, and as a problem for which the state should accept some responsibility. This view is reflected in their social policies. For example, the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act provided pensions for those over 70. And the 1911 National Insurance Act provided sickness benefit to all manual workers and other workers below a certain income level.

**Changing political agendas** This is the third major influence on social policy identified by Donnison (2001).

Different political parties have different political agendas which shape their social policies. For example, the Labour Party has traditionally been the main supporter of social welfare policies. And political agendas change. For example, the policies of New Labour in the 2000s are very different from those of Labour of 20 years ago.

To what extent does sociology influence the thinking of political parties in general and their social policies in particular? This is a difficult question to answer. An attempt will be made in Section 7.3 with reference to Tony Blair's Labour governments.

It is probably safe to say that governments listen to sociologists when it suits them and when sociological theories and research findings fit their politics. This can be seen from the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and John Major (1990-1997). Mrs Thatcher had no time for sociology. However, she was influenced by New Right thinkers who included sociologists like David Marsland in the UK and Charles Murray in the USA.

The New Right blamed the welfare state for creating what they saw as a dependency culture whereby those at the bottom of the class structure became dependent on welfare benefits. As a result, so the argument goes, they lost the will to work, self-reliance, initiative and individual responsibility. The Thatcher and Major governments attempted to end this 'culture of dependency' by reducing welfare benefits and introducing measures such as the Job Seekers' Allowance and the Child Support Agency (Page, 2001).

**New questions** David Donnison (2001) claims that 'major shifts in policy often come about, not when the old

questions are finally answered, but when new questions are asked'. He gives the following example to illustrate this.

For years the question had been: Does the death penalty deter people from killing each other? Researchers researched, politicians debated and the death penalty remained in force. Around 1963, a new question was increasingly heard: Is the death penalty acceptable in a civilised society? And two years later the death penalty was abolished. A new question had led to a new policy.

Does sociology ask new questions which influence government policy? The short answer is sometimes. The following provides an example.

Rowntree's study of poverty in York, discussed earlier, was largely based on the idea of *absolute poverty*. People were defined as poor if they were unable to meet basic needs such as adequate food and shelter. In terms of this concept, it appeared that, by the 1960s, poverty was a small and dwindling problem. Then, two British sociologists, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend, developed a new concept – *relative poverty* – which led to new questions.

Relative poverty was defined as the inability to afford an acceptable standard of living and a reasonable style of life. The idea of basic needs was extended to include things that most people would see as reasonable – for example, an annual holiday and Christmas presents for the children. In terms of relative poverty, 7.5 million people, that is 14.2% of the population, were now defined as poor – a massive jump from previous estimates (Abel-Smith & Townsend, 1965). Earlier studies had seen the elderly as the largest group in poverty. This now changed to the low paid with dependent children (see Activity 7). And this suggested a change in social policy – direct more resources to the low paid with young children.

From the 1960s onwards, sociologists have used the concept of relative poverty. This concept leads to new questions and new answers. Governments have increasingly seen poverty in relative terms and reflected this view in their policies.

## 7.3 Sociology, social policy and New Labour

The influence of sociology on government can probably be seen most clearly in Tony Blair's New Labour – both in the general philosophy of the party and in its social policy.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, they offered a 'Third Way' in politics – neither the traditional left-wing policies of 'old' Labour, nor the right-wing policies of the Conservatives. The Third Way sought new directions and new solutions to old and new problems.

Much of this was influenced by one of Britain's leading sociologists, Anthony Giddens, who has been described as Tony Blair's favourite guru. Giddens' *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* was published in 1998.

### Giddens and the Third Way

In *The Third Way*, Giddens stressed the importance of social solidarity and social cohesion. He argued that a strong society needed active citizens who were concerned not just about their rights but also their duties and obligations to the community.

Giddens called for a renewal of civil society. He saw it as the job of government to promote this renewal. Community-based organisations who have a sense of civic duty should be encouraged. This would strengthen social integration.

Giddens saw *social exclusion* as the main threat to social order and social solidarity. Society would tend to fracture and disintegrate if groups became excluded from the mainstream. For example, if the poor or ethnic minorities were detached from the wider society, they would not feel part of the national community.

What can governments do to prevent social exclusion? In the case of the poor, for example, exclusion can be prevented by raising welfare benefits, improving public services – especially health and education – and providing opportunities to move out of poverty. Without measures such as these, the poor would be excluded from mainstream society and social solidarity would be threatened (Giddens, 1998, 2000; Bennett, 2001).

### New Labour and the Third Way

**Social Exclusion Unit** Giddens's Third Way is reflected in New Labour's social policy. In their first year of government, Labour set up the Social Exclusion Unit to find solutions to the problem of exclusion. The Unit is directly responsible to the Cabinet and it attempts to ensure that all policies – health, education, poverty, crime, urban renewal – are part of a coordinated strategy to deal with social exclusion (MacGregor, 2001).

**Poverty** Living in poverty means exclusion from many of the activities that most people take for granted. The largest group in poverty are low-paid workers and their dependent children. Labour's policy to reduce poverty has focused on this group. It has introduced the following:

- A minimum wage
- The Working Families Tax Credit to top up the wages of low-paid workers
- A significant increase in Child Benefit allowances
- The National Childcare Strategy which provides money for the development of childcare centres
- The Sure Start programme which provides health and support services for low-income families with children under four (Donnison, 2001; Page, 2002).

**Unemployment** Labour's New Deal, introduced in 1998, was part of their programme for social inclusion. The New Deal offered education and training for young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who had been out of work for more than six months. It was later extended to older people.

The New Deal provided personal advisors who offered direction and support to the unemployed, guiding them through the various options – academic courses, vocational training, self-employment, or voluntary work.

The New Deal emphasised the duties of citizenship. It was the duty of unemployed people to take up work and training opportunities. If they didn't, their benefits might be withheld until they did.

**Education** Shortly after their election in 1997, Labour promised to 'overcome economic and social disadvantage and make equality of opportunity a reality' (*Excellence in Schools*, 1997).

The focus was reaching out to the excluded and providing them with opportunities to enter mainstream society. This involved finding new ways of motivating young people in deprived inner-city areas and of improving 'underachieving schools'. For example, Education Action Zones were set up in urban areas which had low levels of educational attainment.

**Citizenship** Labour has made the teaching of citizenship a compulsory part of the secondary school curriculum. One of the aims is to encourage 'active citizenship' – to develop young people who are public-spirited, who recognise their social responsibilities and who translate this into action in their local communities (Chitty, 2002).

**Conclusion** There is plenty of evidence here to suggest that sociology has had an important influence on Labour's social policy. However, this is only one perspective in sociology, and to some extent, only one person – Anthony Giddens. Other sociologists are critical of both the perspective and the person. For example, Stuart Hall has criticised *The Third Way* for attempting to smooth over basic contradictions and conflicts in society. And Angela McRobbie accuses both Giddens and New Labour of giving insufficient attention to the situation of women in society (Bennett, 2001).

## Conclusion

It is not possible to establish with any certainty the relationship between sociology and social policy. The following points can be made.

- Sociology has some influence on social policy. However, it varies from government to government. As noted earlier, sociology was out of favour during the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. However, in the person of Anthony Giddens, it has had a significant influence on Tony Blair and New Labour.
- Governments tend to select particular perspectives within sociology when forming social policy. They are rarely influenced by radical perspectives.
- Sociology provides a range of ideas and evidence which can inform social policy. Sociologists often sit on government committees and working parties which develop social policy. Some are employed by pressure

groups such as the Low Pay Unit and the Child Poverty Action Group.

- People with a background in sociology are often employed by government departments. For example, the Home Office, which carries out its own research, sometimes employs people with qualifications in sociology.
- Some sociologists see themselves as problem raisers rather than problem solvers. They should be critical, they should identify problems, they should open governments' eyes rather than helping to solve problems which governments have identified and selected as deserving of solution.
- Other sociologists see sociology simply as an academic subject. Their job is to conduct research and present their findings, not to apply their research skills to solving problems defined by government. In fact, standing apart from government is a virtue – it helps sociologists to maintain their independence.
- Sociology is only one of many influences on social policy.

## key terms

**Social policy** Government policy on social issues – for example, education, the family and social inequality.

**Absolute poverty** The inability to meet basic needs such as adequate food and shelter.

**Relative poverty** The inability to afford an acceptable standard of living and a reasonable style of life.

**Third Way** A new direction in politics which differs from traditional left-wing and right-wing policies.

**Social exclusion** Exclusion from the mainstream of society.

## summary

1. Many of the founding fathers believed that sociology had an important part to play in changing society for the better.
2. According to David Donnison, social policy is shaped by a variety of factors. These include:
  - Changing circumstances in society
  - A growth in knowledge
  - Changing political agendas.
3. The influence of sociology on social policy varies from government to government. For example, the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s had no time for sociology. However, Tony Blair's Labour governments were strongly influenced by Anthony Giddens' writings.
4. New Labour's concern with social exclusion reflects Giddens' view that social exclusion is the main threat to social solidarity and social order.

## activity7 sociology and social policy

### Item A Two views of poverty

Rowntree conducted three studies of poverty in York – in 1899, 1936 and 1950. Based mainly on a concept of absolute poverty, they indicated a steady reduction in poverty. The table compares Rowntree's 1950 study with a study by Abel-Smith and Townsend in 1960 based on a concept of relative poverty.

Percentage of those in poverty Rowntree 1950	Cause of poverty	Percentage of those in poverty Abel-Smith and Townsend 1960
4.2	Inadequate wages and/or large families	40
68.1	Old age	33
6.4	Fatherless families	10
21.3	Sickness	10
0	Unemployment	7
1.5	Percent of sample population in poverty	14.2

(Wages are adequate or not depending on the number of dependent family members who require support.)

Adapted from Coates & Silburn, 1970

### Item B Tony Blair on social policy

- 'For too long, the demand for rights from the state was separated from the duties of citizenship and the imperative for mutual responsibility on the part of individuals and institutions.'
- 'A key challenge of progressive politics is to use the state as an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organisations and encouraging their growth to tackle new needs, in partnership as appropriate.'
- 'Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty, and it will take a generation.'
- 'The sight of a rough-sleeper bedding down for the night in a shop doorway or on a park bench is one of the most potent symbols of social exclusion in Britain today.'

Quotations from May et al., 2001

## questions

- 1 Read Item A. How might an acceptance of the idea of relative poverty change government social policy?
- 2 Judging from the quotes in Item B, what influence has Anthony Giddens had on Tony Blair's social policy?