



Theory and Methods – Sociology AQA

Revision notes based on CGP revision guide

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Theory

1.1: Consensus structuralism.

1.2: Conflict structuralism.

1.3: Social action theories.

1.4: Modernity and postmodernity theories.

1.5: Sociology and science.

Remember

All evaluation is predicated on generic principles based on:

1. The different 'how and why' provided by different theories to different topics: for example, Marxist explanation versus functionalism, and structural explanations versus micro theories.
2. The comparison of each theoretical perspective for one topic – like the role of education – to culture and identity, for example. Thus, Marxist explanations of the role of education can be assessed with regard to the Marxist explanation of the role of the media, especially that both education and media are secondary agents of socialisation.

Any evaluation points below are key anchors for the above guidelines – application of generic principles of evaluation.

1.1: Consensus structuralism

Overview

Structuralism, and functionalism in particular, were influenced by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917):

- Analysis of society as a whole system that is made up of different parts that mesh together.
- Structural theories can be consensus or conflict based.
- Meta, macro theories, an overarching explanation (consensus), for everything.

Functionalism

Key theorists

- Talcott Parsons
- Davis and Moore
- Young and Wilmott
- Robert Merton
- Walt Rostow

Key ideas

- Consensus, cooperation, shared values, stability, through socialisation: via primary and secondary agents.
- Organic and evolutionary **gradual change**, rather than radical, to maintain stability and social order.
- Stability doesn't mean stagnation. Some changes are essential: gradual reforms.
- **Meritocracy**: people achieve their position in society through effort and ability, by merit rather than inheritance – ascribed versus achieved status, social mobility, equality of opportunities.
- **Welfare state** – to ensure equality of opportunity, tax on higher earners to fund the welfare.
- Social institutions have positive functions, operate together in **harmony** and achieve **stability**.
- **Talcott Parsons** (1951) applies the human body analogy to understand society = it consists of various institutions/organs that are interconnected and work together; the system/body/society needs all of them to function properly. Yet, each fulfil different functions albeit under the umbrella of consensus to shared values and norms. The social contract, the covenant between different groups.
- Society needs the right **balance between social cohesion and social control** = not too much but not too little. Formal and informal sanctions.

- Change is perceived to be **evolutionary** = thus, if one organ changes, all other organs ought to slowly evolve and adapt.
- Social ills such as excessive crime are likely to affect all other parts/institutions, therefore the positive function of crime – via sanctions, reinforcing socialisation to shared values. Social learning = ‘watch and learn’.

Society is based on conformity:

- The interconnectedness between all parts/institutions in society can happen because of **value consensus**. Otherwise, the system cannot survive; rapid change lead to anomie.
- How do we achieve this consensus:

1 – **Socialisation** = passed down from one generation to the next, via primary and secondary agents. It is a slow process; hence rapid changes are detrimental.

Primary = learning **particularist values** of family and community. Early years, family.

Secondary = learning **universalistic values** of wider society through education, media and other institutions. Education system, media, religion, workplace; rising power of influence of the media.

2 – **Social control** = reinforcement of values consensus; conformity is rewarded and non-conformity is sanctioned. Formal and informal.

- **Anomie** = when changes occur too quickly, norms are lost before new ones are acquired = **moral confusion**, vacuum, social instability; in contrast to evolutionary changes and gradual reforms. Socialisation is a slow process therefore rapid changes are negative especially as they tend to focus on the role of institutions rather than values and culture.
- All members of society have various **needs and desires; they are provided by 4 subsystems:**

Instrumental needs are material (food, shelter etc).

Subsystem 1 = **political subsystem:** political parties, trade unions.

Subsystem 2 = **economic subsystem:** industries.

Expressive needs are emotional (belonging, protection etc).

Subsystem 3 = **kinship subsystem:** marriage and family.

Subsystem 4 = **cultural subsystem:** schools, churches.

Evaluation

- **Ignoring conflict** and maintaining inequality = thus, we need to integrate ideas from conflict theories.
- **Marxists and feminists** argue that society is built on conflict rather than consensus: functionalism is in fact a ruling class ideology that is designed to maintain the status quo, or as feminists argue, to maintain patriarchy: the infrastructure determines the superstructure.

- Too much **focus on harmony** and cooperation.
- **Action theories** (Dennis Wrong, 1961) argue that functionalism doesn't allow for free will by assuming that individuals are products of society and don't make their own choices. Thus, functionalism is criticised for a deterministic view, passive individuals.
- **Naïve and overoptimistic orientation** = trying to see a positive purpose in all aspects of society; thus, idealistic, utopic.
- Functionalism argue that conflict is minimal and people accept that inequality is inevitable. **Conflict theorists disagree** and argue that this kind of conservatism sustains inequality and injustice that runs deep.
- Parsons's idea about **meritocracy** is challenged.
- **Postmodernists** = today's society is diverse and functionalism is no longer relevant to understand it.
- Pay attention to potential conflicts in the values of socialisation between primary and secondary agents, accounting for subcultures, and to the increasing power of media – especially social media with fully active individuals.

New Right

Key theorists

Charles Murray = the welfare state created welfare dependency, encouraged lone parenthood and discouraged work, and created an underclass.

Underclass = the segment of the general population in a class hierarchy that is below the working class: 'benefits for life' type of class, with little chance to improve their lives, future, earnings, and position; no social mobility, generational.

Key ideas

- Under Consensus theories, but a micro theory rather than structural. More of a political ideology.
- Can be perceived as consensus but it is important to explain the extent to which it is consensus and why it is **somewhat different** from functionalism consensus as well.
- Like functionalists, they believe in **traditional institutions and values** in society that are required to maintain social order and stability.
- In the UK more specifically a strand of conservatism led by Thatcher and Reagan in the USA = **minimal government intervention** and opposing social policies and welfare. Liberal ideas and free market economy.

- New Right combines **neo-liberal economies** (free market and minimal intervention) with more **traditional conservatism** on social issues such as family life, school discipline and law and order.
- Thus, New Right argue that functionalism failed – increased crime and instability is the ‘proof’ and they offer an alternative to achieve and maintain consensus and stability.
- While New Right share the main functionalist arguments, it is argued that in the late 20th century society became dysfunctional rather than functional. Consequently, **society is less consensual**, less harmony, less stability, including rising levels of crime and deviance.
- Then the **welfare state** is accused for contributing to the breaking down of consensus, for example:
 - Family breakdown, the nuclear family model = inadequate socialisation related to an absence of a father figure: Charles Murray argues that this has led to the creation of an underclass.
 - Over-generous welfare state.
 - Sexual freedom.
 - The funding of the welfare state is via higher tax on high earners and corporations which is in contrast to New Right ideology regarding free market, less regulation, minimal state, and intense competition as healthy for the economy and society.

Evaluation

- New Right is accused of **lacking objectivity** and being a political position that supports low taxes and minimal public spending because welfare spending is causing social problems.
- Conservatives believe that decision making should be directed by **local levels** rather than centralised forms of government. Less regulation, more free markets, limited government. The ‘**invisible hand**’ Adam Smith.
- More of **a political movement** rather than a sociological theory; micro theory.
- Additionally, because it takes into account conflicts between different types of groups and interests it can be argued that it is a conflict theory rather than consensus.
- However, it is **based on functionalist consensus** that ‘went astray’ and sort of needs to be corrected to become, yet again, consensus that is characterised by stability. Thus, the catalyst is nevertheless about consensus.
- **Feminists** criticised New Right for wanting women to focus on marriage and children rather than work and independence. They also argue that New Right is an attempt to justify patriarchal society and can account for domestic abuse in marriages.

- **Postmodernists** would criticise both functionalism and New Right as being reductionist and attempting to create metanarratives without taking into account the complexity of society especially in a global world.
- Link with **right versus left realism** from crime and deviance.

1.2: Conflict structuralism

Overview

- Different parts of society clash and are in **conflict**.
- Like consensus theories, the argument is that society is composed of various parts = social institutions and organisations (= **structuralism**), but in contrast to consensus theories there are pivotal conflicts between key players within this structure, at a structural level.
- Structural theories can be based on the feature of consensus or conflict.

Marxism

Key theorists

- **Karl Marx** (1818-1883).
- **Gramsci** – neo-Marxism humanistic Marxism.
- **Louis Althusser** – neo-Marxism structuralist Marxism.

Key ideas

- **Marx** – infrastructure, the economic system dictates all aspects of life, the superstructure = all institutions in society = economic determinism.
- A **dialectical theory** that cannot be falsified (same as psychodynamic theory Freud in psychology). Based on contradictions at the structural level that are a feature of society (and for Freud of the human being).
- **Capitalism**. Class war at the heart of the system in the infrastructure and determining all aspects of the superstructure. While Marx focused on capitalism, the argument was relevant for all economic systems preceding it.
- The ruling class, **bourgeoisie** owns and controls the means of production (factories, machineries etc) and the working class, **proletariat** works for the ruling class.
- The role of the **superstructure** is to legitimise the ruling class and protect its interests (profits, position, ownership) = to **perpetuate the inequality** without making it look as if it exists = **false consciousness** (and compare to

unconsciousness for Freud). The working-class individuals aren't aware of their exploitation and oppression: it is done through **indoctrination**.

- Only a **revolution** can change the situation; firstly, it requires re-education to fight off the false consciousness and for the working class to be aware of their predicament characterised by injustice and exploitation – then unite and lead a revolution towards communism which is global equality = **utopia**.
- No gradual reforms, a revolution instead, even at the price of violence. Why the revolution is the only solution? Because no one gives up power voluntarily.
- Thus, no gradual reforms are viable, a revolution worldwide in all possible means. The ruling class will never give up its power, so the working class needs to reclaim it = 'the system is rotten to the core', the inequality is deep-seated, thus will have to be 'cleared' at its core structure.

Neo-Marxism and the focus on ideology

Ideology = a set of ideas and beliefs about every aspect of life such as economy, politics, society etc.

While the Marxist revolution didn't materialise in the Western world except in some Eastern European countries, in the 20th century, Neo-Marxist developed new models to make Marxism more relevant to the modern world:

1 – Gramsci and humanistic Marxism

Gramsci (1971) focused on **hegemony** = domination of ruling class ideology in society.

He argued that social control doesn't just arise from economics but also from **ideas**.

The ruling class controls the means of producing of ideas (the press, media, education etc), socialisation, and thus its ideas become dominant and the working class accepting these values as fair and just. Consent is a crucial way of maintaining power, more than coercion = internalisation of ideas at the level of beliefs rather than merely behaviours. Therefore, conformity and obedience.

People would never just climb-up the social hierarchy merely because of economic position. Rather they need to do so intellectually – via ideas and values – by creating an alternative proletariat hegemony with new ideas and mechanisms to organise society.

2 – Althusser (1970) – a structuralist Marxist

People cannot simply develop new ideas about society and its organisation. This option is a lie created and maintained by the society's **ideological state apparatuses** such as the press, religion and education system that are closely controlled by the state. Because of the state apparatuses, workers do not have class consciousness. Hence forever will be trapped in their predicament.

While Marx believed that the **economy controls everything**, (infrastructure determines the superstructure) Althusser argues that there are two other significant structures = **political and ideological**. Each of these structures is partly independent from the other two. Althusser believed that capitalism would be overthrown when these three structures will eventually contradict one another.

Evaluation

- **A famous quotation from Marx:** ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it’ – Marx wasn’t only a political ideologist but also an activist calling for the communist revolution.
- Marxism is **deterministic** and oppression is perceived to be inevitable within the capitalist system and the class war, until a revolution will eradicate the inherent inequality, in all economic systems that allow private ownerships.
- Thus, collective property in communism: to eradicate power hierarchies.
- Traditional Marxists focused on **class conflict** largely ignoring ethnicity and gender. Thus, the interplay between various sociodemographic variables.
- **The fall of communism** in Eastern Europe is used as evidence for flaws in Marxist theory. However, some argue that Eastern European countries didn’t have genuine communism. Also, communism sort of needs to be global to be ‘properly’ achieved and maintained. Otherwise, there is always a power struggle that is anchored in lack of equality.
- **Neo-Marxists** share Marx’s analysis but focus on culture and ideas rather than the economy and class war. The war if anything, is ideological. However, it is anchored in structural elements. Having said that, because Marx argues that the infrastructure determines the superstructure, traditional Marxism also emphasise the role of culture and politics in the process of false consciousness.
- Some suggest society is not just about conflict and it is too complex to be **reduced to one central conflict** without taking into account any elements of consensus or any shared values and beliefs.
- Many problems that were attributed to capitalist systems were present also in communist ones: crime, corruption, inequality, exploitation, etc.
- **Max Weber**, one of the founding fathers of sociology, combined functionalist and Marxist arguments. Conflict can be present between all kinds of social groups and related institutions rather than be restricted to owners/ruling class versus workers/working class. **Divisions are also across class, status and political grouping**. Also, in contrast to Durkheim that focused on the division of labour and solidarity, Weber considered status, religion, ideas and other organisational factors to be important. It is ‘difficult’ to ‘classify’ Weber because his arguments are rooted in different theories and ideas.

Feminism

Key ideas

- Focus on **gender inequality** rather than class inequality. Gender war versus class war.
- Society is **patriarchal** and its institutions are run and controlled by men and for the interests of men. Exploitation and oppression of women.
- Traditional sociology is **male-orientated**.
- We must take into account: biological sex as binary, then binary gender, and nowadays none of it applies. Furthermore, gender identity can fluctuate and keep changing.
- Resorting to study issues that were ignored such as domestic abuse, power relationships within the family structure and gender inequality in education and the workplace.
- Different strands of feminism: some are closer to other theories compared to being closer to one another under feminism. Substantial differences.

Liberal feminists = the main cause of inequality is **lack of legitimate opportunities** for women in education, employment and politics. Very similar idea to meritocracy in functionalism.

The best solution is to create equal opportunities. Thus, not necessarily equality.

Such as the introduction of the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act.

Were criticised for failing to recognise that patriarchal values are structurally deeply rooted in other areas of social life such as the family and not only in formal social institutions.

Equal opportunities are the key mechanism to minimise gender inequality.

Radical feminists = the system is **rotten from the core** by patriarchy (rather than class inequality) and not just with regard to lack of equal opportunities. Patriarchy is inherent in social structures and therefore requires radical change rather than legal change. Society needs to change; the structure of society needs to change.

Kate Millett (1970) argued that patriarchy is the first and most fundamental form of inequality that penetrates all other forms and thus operates above all other forms of exploitation. All relationships involve imbalance of power, at work and at home, aimed to keep women in subordinate roles to the benefit of men.

Some radical feminists favour **separatism** by arguing that equality between men and women is impossible because of the inherent threat of violence thus the only solution is separation between the sexes. Power struggle.

Marxist feminists = capitalism benefits from the **exploitation of women**. Within families, women look after homes and the children for free and at no cost for the state. Thus, there is a correspondence between class and gender in the hierarchy.

Gender and class are equally important, not only gender, and not only class.

Ansley (1972) argued that women also bear the brunt of their husbands' work frustrations (chain of aggression) which would otherwise be directed at their capitalist employers. Thus, women as scapegoats on all fronts.

Difference feminists = women are **oppressed by patriarchy, capitalism and racism**. They argue that there are **differences** between men and women but that **no value** or judgement can be placed upon such differences and both sexes have moral status as persons. When speaking about being a woman, we ought to account for class and race as well, not only gender.

Similar to the traditional **Black feminism**. Women are oppressed by the patriarchy but also by capitalism and racism. Minority-ethnic and working-class women are the most discriminated against in society.

Not all women share the same experience of patriarchy. In essence, this is also a postmodernist idea – that the personal subjective experience of women can differ significantly, thus we cannot place all women in one category without taking into account other sociodemographic factors (socially constructed identities) but also subjective personal experience.

Postmodernist feminism = femininity is an **identity choice** which can be celebrated rather than rejected, and it is a matter of free will, as all other 'labels' that are not considered to be socially constructed.

We are in a new era beyond sheer modernity, and there is diversity of identity and narratives rather than overarching one single version with fixed features. The same applies to sex definition and differences. Gender identity is an important part and yet separate from biological sex (see culture and identity).

'Wonder bras' replacing 'burning bras' that characterised the feminist movement.

- Some argue that feminism ignores and perhaps even contributed to the crisis of masculinity.

Evaluation of conflict theories

- Marx's ideas were **highly influential** and thereby shaped theories that 'borrowed' some of his ideas and rejected others.

For example, **Gramsci** and more recently **Stuart Hall** – they emphasise cultural aspects of conflict rather than the original economic and capitalist focus.

- Just as functionalists can be criticised for their naïve outlook, conflict theories can be criticised for their **pessimism and negativity**.
- Contemporary **society is too complex** to be defined by a single conflict.

Evaluation of structural theories

- These are **macro** sociological theories. The ideas of consensus and conflict are macro ideas because they relate to an overarching factor to explain every aspect of society, be it consensus or conflict.
- People are not just individuals, rather, they are the product of the **social conditions** in which they live.
- Any research of human beings needs to take into account the **structure** of society and its institutions.
- **Determinist theories** = suggesting a particular inevitable outcome to be the result of the key factor they focus on.
- Hence, also **reductionist**.
- Ignoring **free will** and choice. Passive individuals.
- The alternative – social action theories and postmodernism, micro theories.

1.3: Social action theories

Overview

- Action theories are **micro theories** because they examine small groups and individuals rather than the big picture of social structures and systems.
- Humans are **social actors** who act rather than react, thus, they have agency for action even though they are being influenced by society.
- Society affects individuals but individuals also affect society, yet eventually **they decide** how to behave.
- Two-way exchange = interactionism.

Key ideas

(1) **Action theories see social order as a social construction**

Social order is not generated by institutions, either through consensus or conflict. Rather, social order is part of everyday life, and everyday life is a series of interpretations (the subjective element) and behaviours (the objective element).

Social order is a **social construction** = a product of individuals' minds.

Compare with culture and identity as socially constructed – thus based on expectations. Here, the focus is on the way in which people interpret the world around them, and that interpretation is also influenced by interactions with others rather than by 'big' agents of socialisations and social organisations.

Interactionism offers a dynamic perspective. People also want to believe that there is order in society, so they behave towards others in a way that convinces them that there is order. For example, they follow social norms such as being polite and not stealing from each other.

(2) Action theories reject the idea that sociology is objective

If you believe individuals put their own meanings and labels on the world, it implies that people have **different labels and meanings** of the same actions. That is because everyone may interpret an action (such as drinking alcohol regularly) differently to someone else, depending on the meaning attached to such action.

Thus, subjectivity plays a role, and therefore individual differences.

The difference between sensation and perception and the link with postmodernism.

Consequently, sociologists cannot predict people's behaviour as easily as structural approaches would suggest. People don't passively react to external stimuli in the same way and every single time. Individuals react differently depending on circumstances, their own perceptions of these circumstances and their own personal beliefs systems.

Therefore, actions theories are highly subjective rather than objective theories.

The difference between sensation and perception and the effects on research methods.

Examples: labelling theory self-fulfilling prophecy compared with self-refuting; anti-school subculture compared with pro-school subculture.

Interactionism

A broad sociological perspective, **a micro action theory**, rather than a macro, structuralist one.

Interactionism is a perspective that regards society as the product of **human interactions** and the meanings that individuals place on those interactions.

Rather than examining human behaviour in the context of large social structures and key conflicts or cleavages in society, interactionists examine society at a micro level and perceive **individuals to have agency** rather than react automatically to forces outside their control. The interaction is between individuals and society, they influence one another.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Weber recognised that micro interactions operate alongside social structures to influence human behaviour.

Weber was seeking **'verstehen'** = deep empathic understanding.

Human behaviour needs to be explained at two levels:

1 – **the level of cause** – how the behaviour is shaped by objective structural factors.

2 – **the level of meaning** – subjective meanings that people attached to their actions.

For example:

Same-sex marriage was legalised in England and Wales in 2014. At the level of cause, Tim and James get married because the law makes it possible. At the level of meaning, they get married because of the love they feel for one another.

Weber categorised different possible meanings into four types of actions:

1 – **Instrumentally rational action** that is based on the most efficient means of achieving a goal = Sue builds a bridge to get across the river.

2 – **Value-rational action** is taken because something is important for its own sake = Mary builds a bridge because she thinks bridges are beautiful.

3 – **Traditional action** is based on habit = Mel builds a bridge because her family have always built bridges.

4 – **Affectual action** is based on emotion = Paul builds a bridge because his wife died trying to cross a river.

Evaluation

- Less determinist, less objective, less reductionist.
- Weber has been criticised for focusing on individual meanings without explaining how we developed shared ones (to indicate consensus and shared values).
- It is difficult to classify actions into just one of the four types above. There are complex underling foundations for each action, complexity, psychology.

Symbolic interactionism, Herbert Mead (1934)

Focus on how we **relate to one another**.

Mead claimed that most human interaction is symbolic = when you wave at a friend across the road, **a symbol** = the wave, conveys a meaning of the action = greeting.

There is a gap between the friend seeing the symbol and responding to it, during which they interpret the action. To do this, they must put themselves in your position. This is called **'taking the role of the other'**.

According to Mead, we **learn to interpret symbols through social interactions** and it is knowledge of shared symbols and their meanings that allows us to function as members of society.

However, people may interpret the same action differently, or more importantly, their behaviour (objective, waving at someone) might not 'match' their underlying thoughts and cognitions (subjective, I wave but I can't stand him...).

Blumer (1969) added to Mead's ideas

- Actions aren't instinctive, they are based on meanings we attach to the world around us.
- These meanings emanate from the ways in which we relate to others, so sometimes they can change.
- We mostly relate to others by taking the role of the other.

Ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel (1967)

Argues that **society is a construct**.

Society is created from the 'bottom-up', it is not an objective structure but something that we construct ourselves through our behaviour. Thus, it can change based on changes in our construction of it.

The bottom-up approach is micro-sociology whereas the top-bottom approach is macro-sociology.

Studying the methods that we use to create meanings. For them, meanings are always unclear because they are dependent on the context = **indexicality**.

To prevent lack of clarity from causing chaos we engage in **reflexivity** = using our common sense to determine the meanings of behaviour and communication so we can maintain social order.

Structuration, Anthony Giddens (1984)

Combines structuralism with social action.

Giddens believes that sociologists should examine the interactions between individuals and the social structures that influence these interactions.

Like structuralism, **structuration** argues that individuals have to conform the rules of social structures and social systems because various actions depend on these structures. Giddens used the example of **language** = you have to stick to the rules of a language to communicate with others.

However, Giddens argued that the structures are also dependent on people living by them = a language only survives if people use it. Structuration theorists also say that social structures can be changed by the actions of individuals = new words can be added to a language, and various styles can evolve.

Individuals also respond to the structures in different ways; they have awareness of the social rules and structures and have some level of choice about how to react to them.

Related concepts to action theories

Many concepts that were integrated into social action theories can be seen as social psychological concepts. Therefore, they take into account the individual (behaviours, emotions, and mental processes).

The looking glass self, Cooley

The individual's own identity or sense of self is created by their interactions with other people. Our idea of self, derives from how we understand that others see us. This perspective informs many interactionist ideas including:

Goffman, the dramaturgical approach

People play roles in society, like actors on stage.

Labelling theory, Howard Becker

Examining how applying a label to someone can influence their self-concept and might become a master status, their identity.

As a result, self-fulfilling prophecy = expectations of others create reality. Compared with self-refuting prophecy and individual differences to explain accepting versus rejecting a label.

Moral panics = a mass movement based on false or exaggerated perception that some cultural behaviour or group of people is dangerous, deviant and posing a threat to social values and interests. It is often fuelled by media coverage of social issues. Thus, amplifying or engineering a situation thereby 'creating' reality.

Evaluation

- Highly influential in sociology, especially moving away from positivist approaches to interpretivist approaches.
- Most sociologists today understand that human beings have agency and can make decisions, and that social structures do not determine human behaviour in simple, direct and predictable way.

1.4: Modernity and postmodernity theories

Modernity, postmodernity and late modernity.

Modernity

Modernity refers to a particular era in human history = the industrial world that began to emerge in Western Europe in the late 18th century.

The era began with the Renaissance (=Revival, Rebirth), a period in European history from the 14th to the 17th centuries when modern ideas about science, culture and philosophy were emerging and consolidating. Renaissance was the period of transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity.

Characterised by scientific thoughts (rather than metaphysical and supernatural beliefs), individualism, rational thinking, mass production, urbanisation and state bureaucracy.

Modernists believe that we can discover truths about our society through **rational** scientific thinking and exploration (compared with postmodernists who argue there is no such thing as 'truth' in the first place).

While there is a general agreement about the beginning of modernity there is a debate about when this period ended, if it ended, and what period followed.

The aim of modernist sociological theories = **to scientifically investigate** the development and elements of societies and how and why they are the way they are.

Modernist theories are the structuralist theories of functionalism and Marxism, these are grand meta-theories with overarching explanations.

Postmodernism

Postmodernists suggest we are at a new era in history that is significantly different to modernity. It is a broad movement across various disciplines that rejects the certainties, methods and arguments that were part of modernity.

Postmodernists argue that the current era in history is characterised by **rapid change** and **choice**. Consequently, parallel developments that change the scientific roadmap.

Work is more flexible, consumption of cultural goods, pluralism of culture, identities and free will and choice.

It is a '**pick and mix**' culture of choosing identities rather than inheriting them. Moreover, these choices and narrative can be in constant influx.

Criticism of grand theories for insisting on metanarratives that explain everything without taking into account the complexity and nature of the new world we live in.

Features of postmodernity

- **Plurality and diversity** = society is complex, diverse and multicultural and there is no apparent role of consensus (nor of a key structural conflict) as it doesn't fit with the features of the world we live in: a world of different groups, cultures, identities, and by implication, different narratives.

Traditional socialisation agents cannot socialise towards a set of value consensus because people believe, need and choose different things. They can also change their choices at different points in time. Thus, dynamic.

- **Globalisation** = and the changing nature of media = becomes a foundation for the postmodernist era: globalisation of consumption and culture, technology and communication and global economy and transnational corporations.

In alliance with the decline of the nation-state compared with the world as 'one big village', and the nature of global media.

- **Choice** = postmodern societies are characterised by choice that is expanded by the pluralist and diverse composition of society. People do not have to 'stick' to their subculture and adopt the inherent attributes that come with it: you can choose your family, gender, school, religion; you can also create your own label rather than just choose an existing one. And once you have chosen, you can choose again, differently.
- **Relativism** = given the fluid nature of identity, choice and narratives, postmodernists are often criticised for being relativist because they reject the idea of one single obliging truth (such as offered by structuralist meta-theories), if at all any truth could possibly exist or identified.
- Therefore, subjective rather than objective, qualitative rather than quantitative data.

Evaluation

- Baudrillard (1981) and hyper-reality: argued that postmodern society is more about **consumption** than production, and consumption included how we consume signs and symbols. Because we don't have a consensus about what things are, or what is real and what is unreal (postmodernist ideas), we consume signs that are in fact meaningless = he called that situation **hyper-reality** = an inability to distinguish between real and unreal, and **simulacra** replaces reality

(an image/representation of something). This is a highly critical view of the media and pessimist about society because he argues that if we cannot tell what is real, we have lost the capacity to improve society. Baudrillard is considered a postmodernist theorist but critical of some serious implication regarding the distortion of reality.

- The problem is always the delicate balance and where to draw the line, and who is 'eligible' or 'qualified' to draw it?
- **And link in psychology** = all mental disorders involve distortion of reality as clinical symptoms, and psychotic disorders involve a certain degree of a breakdown in the distinction between reality and imagination/narrative.
- Too much of all the above features... criticised for taking the understanding of the new world we live in to extreme implications.
- Social change always happens and the last decades are no different and did not change the world or life in such dramatic ways as to 'deserve' to be embedded in a totally different period. Some argue we are still in modernity albeit one that keeps on changing.
- If all theories are just competing narratives, then the same could be argued about postmodernism itself: postmodernism is another grand meta theory. While it examines diversity and narratives, it does so in almost structural terms, a meta-argument about everything in society. Rigid authoritarian argument about: all is relative and contingent on narratives.
- **Marxists** argue that postmodernism is one more ideological way to legitimise and perpetuate capitalism. This is done by selling the idea that society is ultra complex and interconnected and thus cannot be changed.
- Postmodernism encouraged **introspection** of sociologists, psychologists and political scientists to examine their own attitudes and values and the effects of research in their respective fields.

Late modernity as an alternative to postmodernism

There is a debate in sociology about whether the society we live in today is a whole new era or another phase within the modern contemporary era that can be called late modernity, high modernity or sometimes liquid modernity.

Key features

- **Giddens (1990)** = contemporary society is on a continuum and therefore the modern era is not breaking away from this continuation.

The changes in late modernity in work, consumption and culture are accelerated because of two processes:

1 – **Reflexivity** = constant reflection on ourselves, our actions and consequently modification of our actions.

2 – **Disembedding** = interactions with one another without meeting face-to-face = social media. Through new media we are no longer embedded in our local community.

- Constant **change**.
- **Individualism** = Beck (1992) argued that the age of the individual was a key characteristic of modernity and was accelerated dramatically in late modernity. We therefore have to take more responsibility and accountability for our own actions; that increases reflexivity.
- **Risk consciousness** = both Giddens and Beck argue that late modernity is characterised by a risk society. Beck = global risk society, because of environmental disasters, wars, terrorism etc. Risk consciousness refers to how we seek to minimise risk and negative consequences. Politicians can also assist in minimising risks and improving society and providing solutions to crises.
- Giddens argued that despite the risk society we live in, human beings are **rational** and proactively seek solutions to crises to improve life. Giddens disagree with postmodernists about our ability to solve problems in society because as a modernist he believes human beings are rational and make plans to reduce risks.
- Postmodernists criticise late modernists for failing to recognise that the modern era has ended and fail to acknowledge the dramatic changes of the new era.
- Others argue that perhaps both postmodernists and late modernists argue more or less the same thing using different words.

1.5: Sociology and science

- ✚ All the issues discussed below in this section on sociology and science need to be considered together with the section of research methods.

Overview

A key debate whether sociology is a science. The founding fathers of sociology such as **Augusto Comte** and **Emile Durkheim** considered sociology as science.

This is a **positivist view** = sociology can use methods to establish social facts and prove universal laws, exactly like the natural sciences.

In contrast, interpretivist sociologists argue that sociology is not a science, cannot be a science and shouldn't try to be one. Unlike natural phenomena as our subject of investigation, human beings have agency and therefore would not consistently and predictably conform to patterns and developments.

Science uses experiments and observations to test theories.

Collecting data to test hypotheses.

What is science =

- Organised and systematic.
 - Empirical = knowledge is gained through direct experience and observation, using senses, objective.
 - Rigorous test of hypotheses.
 - Cumulative = new knowledge builds on existing knowledge.
 - Collective = the scientific community, peer review of new research.
- ✚ Think about the difference between behaviours (objective, directly observed) and emotions and cognitions (subjective, cannot be directly observed) in terms of application to different theories and relevant issues.

Merton and CUDOS norms for science

- Communalism = the scientific community works together and its findings belong to everyone.
- Universalism = open to and applicable to everyone.
- Disinterestedness = scientists work to advance knowledge; it is not for personal gain.
- Organised skepticism = science questions everything all the time.

Three epistemological approaches

- The nature of knowledge: how do we know that we know, when do we know that we know.
- The accumulation of knowledge: how does science progress.

1 – Logical positivists

Scientists seek to establish **general scientific laws**, patterns, regularities.

We observe something and decide that it needs to be explained.

Formulating the hypothesis to provide an explanation.

The hypothesis is then tested in experiments.

If the experiments confirm the hypothesis, then it becomes a scientific law that is **universal**, thus, generalisation.

Induction (from observation to the top/general law) versus **deduction** reasoning (top-down logical process).

Remember, it is practically impossible to argue that there is a pure inductive reasoning, nor deductive reasoning. They are inextricably connected.

2 – Karl Popper (1959)

Argued that experiments should try to prove the hypothesis is wrong = **falsification**.

You cannot prove a hypothesis is 100% correct nor valid regardless of how many times you confirm it by evidence. In contrast, falsifying the hypothesis is sufficient only once to contradict the hypothesis and therefore reject it. That is true knowledge, not when we confirm hypotheses, but when we reject them.

Example = all swans are white, compared with observing one black swan. Or assuming there is a pink swan out there somewhere even if we have not yet observed it.

Thus, it is impossible to know absolute truth because it is always predicated on the possibility that the 'falsification' is somewhere out there.

3 – Thomas Kuhn (1962)

Disagreed with both logical positivism and Popper.

Science has an accepted body of knowledge = **normal science**.

Scientists make assumptions and treat them as a given; this way of looking at the world is called a **paradigm**. Remember, assumptions are the elements that underpin hypotheses. But while hypotheses need to be investigated, assumptions are accepted as a given and being used as a platform to extrapolate the hypotheses.

Big leaps of scientific advancements (like the invention of the telescope to observe that Earth revolves around the sun) = Copernicus with the naked eye and Galileo with the telescope confirmed the observation.

Big leaps happen with falsification; there is a **scientific revolution** and a new paradigm is thereafter being established.

Is sociology a science – the case for 'Yes'

Popper argued that some sociological concepts are not scientific because they cannot be proved wrong. Kuhn argued that sociology doesn't have a paradigm = there is no consensus about the concepts and their measurements (operationalisation).

Positivist sociologists argue that it is possible for sociologists to operate as scientists following the features of science above:

- Pose a question.
- Conduct background research.
- Create a hypothesis.
- Test with experiments, using quantitative data
- Analyse data and reach a conclusion.
- Results reviewed by peers and then published.

Positivist sociologists can analyse **social facts** = things that can be observed and measured directly. Social facts are external to individuals and thus constrain their behaviour.

Looking for correlations in data and cause-and-effect relationships.

This orientation can be criticised on many grounds. What do we measure, how do we measure, and primarily the question of validity = if and how what we investigate and measure is indeed a reflection of the concept we are interested in.

Quantitative methods such as questionnaires, official statistics which are objective and reliable.

Positivist sociologists like Comte and Durkheim were firm believers that sociology is a science. Durkheim in his famous study 'Suicide' (1897) aimed to demonstrate how sociology can be a science that can explain all human behaviour, acting in similar ways to natural scientists: he gathered quantitative data, tested the hypothesis against a range of variables and reached a conclusion.

He examined rates of suicide in different European cities and found that it was consistent over time, but varied between societies and different groups within the same society.

Evaluation

- Interpretivists and postmodernists argue that while chemicals will react in the same way, human beings are more complicated and have an **agency**, thus, lack of determinism.
- Popper argued that positivist sociology fails to be scientific because it tends to rely on inductive rather than deductive reasoning = instead of subjecting their hypotheses trying to find evidence to disprove them, they try and find evidence to support their hypotheses (think the white swan compared with one black swan).

- Popper also argued that sociology has many concepts that cannot be falsified and therefore cannot be scientific, such as false class consciousness. This is similar to the psychodynamic approach and Marxism in general as dialectical theories that cannot be falsified at the level of the assumptions: because these theories are immanently built on contradictions. And science cannot tolerate contradictions such as a swan can be white and black at the same time...
- Durkheim was criticised by sociologists about the reliability of the data and scientific rigour of his methods. In addition, some concepts, such as social cohesion and social control are very difficult to operationalise.
- Sociology is loaded with concepts that are quite abstract and therefore very difficult to be measured and quantify.
- And when measured, it doesn't necessarily reflect what it aims to measure.
- Remember again: the difference between behaviours, emotions and cognitions. And the implications.
- And while behaviour can be directly observed it is relatively the superficial dimension and can be a misleading representation of what the individual feels and thinks, rather than how one behaves.
- Furthermore, the investigator is a human being – with one's own composition of behaviours, emotions, and cognitions; biases, etc.

Is sociology a science – the case for 'No'

Interpretivists argue that the study of human society must go beyond the empirical method. They take a more subjective approach to sociology because they try to understand human behaviour from the point of view of the individual. Similar to psychology where the unit of analysis is the individual. Therefore, they use qualitative methods that allow the examination of meanings, motives and reasons behind human behaviour and social interactions.

Weber argued that it is important to use 'empathy' to understand why individuals are doing what they are doing, like putting oneself in someone else's shoes.

Interactionists/interpretivists are often trying to examine their questions in that way.

They argue that not only sociology is not a science, but it should not try to want to be a science. Otherwise, the discipline is 'losing' touch with its 'spirit'. Humans are not like chemical elements and natural materials and therefore should not be investigated by methods borrowed from the natural sciences.

Also, postmodernists share the same argument, that sociology could not and should not be a science, because of the nature of its concepts and the questions that sociologists are interested in.

Interactionists, and even more so postmodernists emphasise the interest in:

- Subjective views.
- Beliefs, cognitions.
- Emotions.
- Opinions.
- Values.

Such concepts cannot be empirically defined and measured (at least not directly) and they require interpretation by their nature, regardless of the methods used.

Subjective knowledge, thus, depends on one's point of view and subjective methods provide data that cannot be easily tested; it requires **interpretation**.

Both theories argue that sociologists cannot establish and test **social facts**, and what they call social facts are in fact, **social constructs** = products of society, of interactions and interpretations. To treat these concepts scientifically is to misunderstand their nature in the first place.

Postmodernists go further to argue that scientific theories by their nature are metanarratives and should be excluded.

Evaluation

- If sociology is not a science, then what is it, what purpose does it serve and how should it be treated as a discipline?
- Sociology cannot just be used to describe interesting phenomena; it must as a discipline provide explanations that are somehow examined and tested.
- Even Weber who is considered to be the founding father of interactionist sociology argued that the discipline needs to seek to be objective as much as possible.
- These questions have significant importance in the context of the applications of sociological knowledge into social policies.
- Remember: the subject of investigation is a human being, and the investigator is a human being. Furthermore, everything that is based on and open to interpretation (by the subject or the investigator) is in essence subjective. And subjective is not objective nor empirical.

Is sociology a science – a third way

Thomas Kuhn argued that science is not quite the same as it has been traditionally.

Kuhn argued that sociology is not a mature mainstream science because it hasn't found a unifying paradigm, thus, sociology is considered to be a **'young science'**.

Postmodernists argue that science is not, could not, and should not be value-free, nor can it be objective. Also, scientists are influenced by their motives in choosing a subject of investigation and they are often funded by major organisations with their own interest in specific results, such as oil or pharmaceutical companies.

Realist sociology

Realism = different things in different contexts.

Realists believe that sociology can be scientific but they divide science into two types:

1 – The study of closed systems = subjects like chemistry where the variables can be closely controlled and laboratory experiments can be conducted.

2 – The study of open systems = subjects such as meteorology where the variables are difficult or even impossible to control. Thus, very difficult to test and the inability to make predictions.

Sayer (1984), a realist, argued that sociology is the scientific study of an open system. Society, like the weather, is too complex to be like a closed system.

Realists employ both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Science is not primarily defined by the collection and recording of observational data alone. Rather, the search for the underlying causes of things even when it cannot be directly observed. It is a scientific effort and aspirations.

Sociology cannot be entirely value-free. Nevertheless, sociologists need to try collect and present data in a clear and neutral way ('try' is the key concept here...).

Subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom

Overview and context

Ontology = the philosophical study of existence, of being.

It is relevant for sociological research because of the discussion over **social facts** – do they objectively exist, or are they merely **social constructs**? If they are social constructs, they are open to arguments over their nature and indicators.

Ontological discourse is linked with epistemology.

Epistemology = the philosophy of knowledge, and by implication, of science:

1 – How do we know that we know? And what is the nature of knowledge?

2 – How does science progress?

In sociology, the debate over social facts versus social constructs embody the heart of the debate between positivists and interpretivists.

Positivists believe it is possible to establish social facts using objective and scientific methods.

Interpretivists believe that while it is impossible to establish social facts objectively, it is possible to investigate the subjective interpretations of behaviour.

Phenomenology = developed around symbolic interactionism; the idea that society is made-up by people, and social phenomena are social constructs.

The family, for example, is not an objective social fact but rather something that is understood by the meaning people attach to the concept: and this meaning can change over time and across cultures and groups.

- Link with culture and identity.

Consequently, phenomenologists favour qualitative research that is high on validity offering **verstehen** as argued by Weber, rather than focusing on reliability, objectivity and meta generalisations. Therefore, a qualitative approach, interpretivist.

Childhood, for example, is examined by functionalists as a social fact. However, the concept means different things at different times and for different cultures. Let alone, for different individuals, within the same construct of a given 'family'.

While positivists and functionalists argue that social concepts and institutions can be studied as social facts, objectively, the challenge they face is the operationalisation and measurement of such abstract concepts.

Objectivity and subjectivity

Objectivity requires that the researcher must not allow values, bias or views (they are subjective) to influence any stage of the study, analysis and findings. Ethical considerations may frame and contextualise the study but must not be impacting any stage of the investigation. While we use the word 'must' surely it is practically impossible to control, but awareness is a key factor, and trying to minimise the impact of subjective domains is essential albeit not easily achieved.

- Remember, not only we are investigating human beings (the subject of investigation) in the social sciences compared with materials for example, but the investigator is also a human being encompassing the complexity that we always refer to about being a human being.

Reliability requires for the study to be objective and scientific: connected with methodology = standardised procedures, between investigator and between one investigation and another later study, and replicability. All linked to consistency of results and generalisations.

Weber argued that while sociologists should be interested in subjective views of individuals, they nevertheless should remain objective throughout the various stages of research. Others, such as postmodernists, argue that objectivity is inherently impossible, at any stage. Furthermore, objectivity is not necessarily desirable. That is another dimension of the issue.

Interpretivists argue that because sociologists cannot establish social facts, they are inherently interested in subjective elements that can easily influence research design, analysis and interpretations.

Additionally, postmodernists and interpretivists emphasise that not only the subject of investigation = human beings, cannot be studied objectively, but the challenge is exacerbated because the researcher is a human being, with the same challenges of one's subjectivity and meanings given to social constructs and institutions.

Values

Comte, Marx and Durkheim argued that sociology should aim to discover social facts about how society works. They believed that society is shaped by wide value systems and the meanings and values we attach to things, actually determine these systems. However, these values are not attached to individuals and therefore sociologists can study society without worrying about personal value judgements.

Weber disagreed and argued that there is a crucial difference between facts discovered by research and the value judgements attached to these facts. For example, you can prove the fact that migration has increased, but you cannot prove the value judgement that immigration controls should be tightened.

Weber argued that values thus are needed when:

- 1- Choosing which area to study = see choice and formulation of research question.
- 2- Interpreting data, but the values involved must be clarified.
- 3- Choosing how to use the findings, applications of findings, together with responsibility and accountability for such applications.

At the same time, Weber argued that the research itself must be kept objective and free of values.

The debate about values in sociology has two elements:

1 – Can it be value-free?

2 – Should it be value-free?

Any discussion of these questions inevitably involves the debate over objectivity and subjectivity in ways that take into account the core arguments of theories. This discourse is not only epistemological, but it connects directly with methods of investigation and the understanding that there is no method better or worse than the other, and each method has its strengths and weaknesses that are embedded in the features of the method itself.

This is linked with the difference between **qualitative** and **quantitative data** as well.

Another point to remember is that while we might gain amazing knowledge by applying specific methods, practical and ethical constraints alike put a hold to such investigation.

Surely, postmodernists and interpretivists, because of their core beliefs regarding social constructs that are based on meanings would argue that sociology could not and should not be value-free. Otherwise, there is no point talking about the role of meanings and interpretations in the first place.

Marxists and feminists would be hell-bent on changing the ills of the world, guided by their perception of injustice, be it class or gender inequality. They are reliant and guided by the need for knowledge to be used to change the world, otherwise what is the point of science?

This question is linked with the difference between **basic and applied science**. Applied science is reliant on the search of applications that can better life and the world = thus, it is open for a debate of what is right/wrong, just/unjust, good/bad = and these are subjective ethical value-laden questions. On the other hand, basic science is considered to be 'pure' and free from such 'practical' considerations, thus, can afford to be value-free with the image of a scientist sitting in an ivory tower pursuing knowledge for the sake of pure knowledge.

To summarise

20th century positivists argue that their research was value neutral. They believe in the scientific process uncovering social facts = objective knowledge through the empirical scientific process.

- ✚ Behaviouralism shaping the social sciences and galvanising the transformation into disciplines such as psychology, politics and sociology into scientific disciplines.

Others argue that the decision of what to study in the first place is value-laden, including the funding.

Others such as postmodernists and interpretivists argue that sociology cannot and should not be value-free. Thus, methods such as participant observations that produce qualitative data that take into account motivations and feelings of target group are essential and useful.

Becker (1970) for example argued that sociologists should in the first place take the side of the underdogs in society, thus, that means taking sides with the less powerful groups in society such as criminals and mentally ill individuals, is a positive thing. Think of sociodemographic factors and terms such as deprivation, differential achievement, marginalisation, social and economic exclusion, and the underclass.

Other relevant factors affecting values in research involve:

- 1 – Funding.
- 2 – Career.
- 3 – Specific culture and subcultures.

Methods

- ✚ Check tutor2u Theory and Methods revision guide for some examples with sociological studies.

Aims

1 – Reliability and validity

Reliability of the method refers to the extent to which the findings would be replicated if the study would be repeated, including inter-rater/observer/researcher reliability. If findings differ, we ought to be confident that what we measured differed rather than the method being inadequate. Thus, reliability is about the consistency of findings and closely attached to standardised procedures which are assumed to increase the potential for this consistency.

For example: in opinion polls on people's voting preferences = if the support for political parties change at different points on time, we ought to be confident that these changes reflect genuine changes in public opinion rather than the result of the research method

being unreliable. Hence, we would not wish to 'find' consistency of findings if in there were genuine changes, in facts about opinion trends. Consequently, it is necessary to juxtapose reliability with validity.

Validity refers to findings that reflect the real picture, thus, measure what we intended to measure.

Data that is high in validity tends to be qualitative by its nature, because it is a rich data and provides us with 'verstehen', deep understanding (Weber).

Research methods with restricted responses (questionnaires with closed questions) or those that are based on numerical data such as official statistics, tend to be considered as weak on validity compared with observations or unstructured interviews. However, relatively reliable.

These issues must always be contextualised with the specific study we are referring to together with implanting the study in the light of existing theories and findings.

2 – Sample, see below.

3 – Objective, and avoiding bias, see above.

Primary data

Collected first-hand, using different methods, for the purpose of a specific study. Time consuming, expensive.

Secondary data

Existing information, personal and historical and published: diaries, letters, memoirs, emails, documentaries, documents, newspapers, census. Secondary data is collected by others and used for a specific study.

Rich qualitative data, rarely produce quantitative, high in validity and verstehen yet lack reliability, usually cannot be easily generalised, relatively easily accessible, gatekeepers (control access to resources), historic and cannot give consent, other documents are in public libraries and are meant to be made available, and favoured by interpretivists.

Official Statistics: as secondary data.

Quantitative data

Advantages and weakness.

Qualitative data

Advantages and weaknesses.

Key issues in research methods

(1) Theoretical considerations affect the choice of the method

The theoretical orientation would affect the topic and method.

In sociology, two theoretical approaches:

1 – Positivism

Macro-sociology, examination of **institutions**.

- Behaviour is influenced by external social factors.
- Scientific-empirical orientation to analyse 'social facts' that affect behaviour and can be measured.
- Quantitative data.
- Testing relationships, cause-and-effect: factors that can explain (cause?!)
underachievement in schools.
- Questionnaires, official statistics: objective and reliable.

2 – Interpretivists (also called interactionists)

Micro-sociology, examination of the **individual within society, and interactions between individuals**.

- We can understand human behaviour using empathy; to understand the meaning we give to our actions, and the actions of others.
- The role of perception, as opposed to sensation.
- Methods that enable the examination of the underlying meanings underpinning individuals' behaviours.
- Positivist methods are weak and limited in understanding subjective meanings of behaviours. But remember, they don't aspire to do it in the first place (Black Box).
- Argue that sociology is not scientific because human beings cannot be measured like other 'objects' in the natural sciences.
- Choice of methods that produce qualitative data, such as: participant observations, unstructured interviews and questionnaires. Nevertheless, even qualitative data can be 'quantified' (content analysis, categories etc) however problematic the process of collecting the data is.

(2) Practical considerations affecting the methods

- Time.
- Money.
- Time is money.
- Characteristics and skills of the researcher.
- Access and opportunity.

(3) Ethical issues

- Consent (informed).
- Avoidance of deception.
- Confidentiality.
- Protection from harm (physiological and psychological).

Covert studies = lack consent.

Milgram = deception, no protection from harm.

Bending and breaking rules in the name of science.

Research Design

(1) Choosing the topic, the general and more specific topic. Factors involved:

- Personal interest.
- Theoretical perspective.
- Funding issues.
- Opportunity.

(2) Funding and cooperation for research.

(3) The researcher's career.

(4) Reviewing the field with respect to the topics, identifying 'gaps'.

(5) Formulating the research question.

Value-free, bias-free, clarity.

(6) Hypotheses

A statement that makes a prediction about the relationship between two factors.

(7) Operationalisation of research concepts/factors/variables:

It is very difficult to define (conceptual definition) and measure (operational definition) sociological concepts, as often they are abstract.

The concept of democracy versus income.

(8) Triangulation

A combination of methods or data to maximise the benefits, including comparing different sets of data.

(9) Pilot study

A small-scale practice run, checking the questions and technical issues so they may be addressed before the actual run of the study. It is test-run study.

(10) **Social surveys**

Quantitative data about a target population using questionnaires or interviews.

Reliable.

(11) **Sample**

The characteristics of the sample are the characteristics of the target population.

Similar proportion in terms of age, class, ethnicity, and gender. The role of sociodemographic variables.

Representative sample: to enable confident generalisations into the target population. A preferred method by positivists. Expensive, practical constraints but useful.

Representative sampling: picking names out of a 'sampling frame' such a complete list of the population being sampled:

Random sampling = names taken at random, by a person or a computer, so each member of the population has an equal chance to be selected.

Systematic = choosing a random starting point in the sampling frame and selecting every n th value, for example, every fifth name etc.

Multi-stage sampling = selecting a sample from within another sample. It is often used to select samples for opinion polls to measure voting intentions: selecting of constituencies to represent the whole country, then postcodes within these constituencies, then houses from these postcodes.

Stratified random sampling = the population is put into segments that are called 'strata' based on attributes such as age, gender or income (like 18-24, 25-34, etc), then names are randomly selected from within each segment.

Although random sampling is regarded as a representative method, some topics require to endure that particular social groups are well-represented, often with respect to social class, gender balance or ethnicity.

Quota sampling is another method.

Quota sampling = similar to stratified, but not random. The selection is made by the interviewer who is required to meet a quota: interview 20 women between the age 18-24, etc.

Non-representative sampling methods

Some target populations are difficult to access (like criminals, very old people).

Snowball sampling = finding initial contacts and getting them to provide more names for the study. It is similar to a chain letter, for example, if you were distributing a questionnaire, you may pass it on to your own contacts who could then pass it on further etc.

Purposive sampling = when the researcher selects non-representative samples in order to falsify the hypothesis. For example: feminist sociologists may try to disprove the idea that gender roles are determined by biological differences would deliberately select samples where women's roles were not different from men's roles, or were not traditionally 'feminine'.

Opportunity sampling = when the researcher needs to select a sample quickly and easily. For example, asking passers-by, or a scientist asking his seminar students. It can be regarded also as a volunteer sample. Quick, easy and practical method. Opportunity-based, easily accessible.

Volunteer sample = participants choose to join the research by choice, often in response to an advert.

(12) **Questionnaires**

Provide quantitative data (but can be qualitative as well, depending on how the questions and answers are presented and then analysed).

Closed questions and multiple-choice answers.

Open-ended questions.

Reliability and validity depend on the type of questions and answers.

Quick, easy, relatively cheap, large numbers.

Can produce both qualitative and quantitative data, it is favoured by positivists and less useful for interpretivists, yet depends on the questions.

Should be: clear and simple questions, clear instructions, clear layout, range of options on multiple-choice, measure what you wish to measure (validity), can be replicated (reliability, standardised).

Should not: ask embarrassing, difficult, personal and threatening questions, ask two questions instead of one, be too long, use sociological terms that are not familiar to most people, and lead respondents in certain ways.

Pilot study is useful to test these issues.

Questionnaires can be used for research of TV viewing habits, purchasing habits, voting behaviours, etc.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) a questionnaire that is run by the British government with about 38,000 respondents a year and publish new results annually.

The British Social Attitudes Survey is conducted annually by the National Centre for Social Research: selecting 3000 respondents annually.

Advantages

- Easy, comprehensive data, short time, easy to analyse.
- Reliable.
- Cheap.
- Anonymous (opportunity to ask sensitive personal information).
- A large sample, possible for representative sample, and good for generalisations.
- Comparisons can easily be conducted across various dimensions.

Disadvantages

- Respondents may not tell the truth: lie, confused, careless, or mistaken.
- Questions may be misleading, or leading, or may mean different things to different people.
- Respondents cannot give extra information, nor 'explain' themselves.
- Postal questionnaires have a low response rate, thus, may not be as representative, or representative to those who responded who may be characterised by unique traits that determine their response to the survey.

(13) Interviews

A conversation between the respondent and the interviewer.

Structured, semi-structured and unstructured.

Selecting the sample, organise the interview, recruit and train the interviewers, ask the questions, record the answers.

Structured interviews, essentially like a questionnaire only it is face-to-face:

Standardised, asks the same questions, in the same order, no deviation from the list.

Quantitative and reliable.

Used in large-scale social surveys.

More expensive than questionnaire because of paying the interviewers.

Ensures high response rate instead of taking the option of email or post.

Unstructured interviews:

Informal with no fixed structure. Like a flowing conversation, may not involve any pre-set questions and the discussion could develop in various directions and topics.

Flexible, open, dynamic.

Good for researching sensitive issues that require gaining trust, but on the other hand can be embarrassing for the respondents who may then avoid to answer, or may lie.

Qualitative data.

Smaller samples, not as representative, difficult to generalise.

Takes much planning.

Interviewers may consciously or unconsciously affect the respondent.

Interviewer effects.

Costing considerations.

Semi-structured interviews:

There is a list of questions, but the interviewer is free to add or skip other questions depending on how the interview unfolds.

Semi-structured interviews are rather common in sociology because of the advantages they provide.

Surely it requires a skilled interviewer compared with non-structured interviews, it is more time-consuming and more expensive.

(14) Experiments

Types of:

1 – Laboratory

Controlled environment, manipulating the IV, control groups, extraneous and confounding variables.

Advantages

- Control of extraneous variables.
- Quantitative.
- Replication and reliability.
- Cause-and-effect, an indication of.

Disadvantages

- Ethical issues – especially informed consent and deception, the right of withdrawal.
- Lack of ecological validity, artificial settings and/or tasks.
- Extraneous variables.
- Respondent's effects, participants, social desirability and demand characteristics (change in behaviour to fit with expectations, based on picking up cues).

Example: Bandura's 'bobo doll' for social learning.

2 – Field

Takes place outside the laboratory in real social settings, and participants are often unaware they are being investigated. Often used by interpretivists, but not only.

Advantages

- Natural settings, higher ecological validity.
- Can show hidden meanings of everyday social interactions.

Disadvantages

- Lack of control of variables.
- People may change their behaviour if they know they are being investigated.
- Ethical issues: informed consent, the right of withdrawal and violation of privacy.

Example: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) on teacher labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy.

(15) Observations

Consider advantages and disadvantages of the types below:

1 – Covert observation

Undercover observation when those being observed are not aware that the observation is taking place. Like acting as a 'secret shopper' or using any form of surveillance.

Rich qualitative data, not the best source for qualitative, high in validity, subjective and cannot be generalised, time-consuming, expensive with practical issues (how to enter the group, staying and leaving the group, risk of harm, law breaking, deception), not useful for positivists but highly useful for interpretivists.

Might be the only way to access data.

Pearson's work on football hooligans, 'Patrick' on criminal gangs in Glasgow.

2 – Overt observation

When everybody is aware that the observation is taking place: for example, in a lesson observation, the observer might introduce oneself, or it would be obvious from how they are sitting and acting.

It allows to avoid the ethical and practical issues involved in covert observations. While it doesn't involve deception it can involve the **Hawthorne effect** = the idea that research participants behave differently when they know they are being observed.

Example: Venkatesh (2011) 'Gang leader for a day' which concerned the organisation of gangs in a Chicago housing estate.

3 – Participant observation

When the researcher plays an active part in what is being observed. For example, in a lesson observation the participant observer would be joining in the discussion and complete activities etc.

4 – non-Participant observation

The observation is just watching without taking part in the observation. The observer may sit separately as well so as to get a good 'view'.

(16) In-depth methods

1 – Case studies

Interpretivists prefer case-studies. Advantages and disadvantages.

2 – Focus groups

A small sample, often fewer than ten people, put in a room together and asked to discuss a particular issue or answer a set of questions.

Like a natural conversation, thus, more authentic and relaxed. Sometimes without the researcher with a video camera or audio recorder. Sociology, politics, business.

3 – Longitudinal study

Social surveys that are conducted at regular intervals over a long period of time. They tend to be large-scale and quantitative, scientific; positivists tend to use them.

Advantages

- Can analyse changes, trends, comparisons over time.
- Study changes in attitudes, beliefs, and values change for the same sample **over time**.

Disadvantages

- Dropout rate.
- Difficult to recruit a committed sample.
- Long-term secured funding.
- Keep the research team together.

4 – Ethnography

The scientific examination of a specific culture by someone with first-hand knowledge of and experience of this culture. Originally used by anthropologists to study traditional societies: they joined the group, learnt their language, social norms and rituals.

It is based on a small-scale fieldwork, tend to produce qualitative data.

Natural setting, higher validity, high ecological validity.

In ethnographic research you can use various methods.

May also use secondary sources like documents, diaries and letters.

Difficult to generalise, but the idea is not really to formulate universal generalisations but to understand a given culture from 'within'.

(17) Secondary data

1 – Statistics

Quantitative secondary data from official statistics and qualitative from documents.

Official statistics are a source of secondary data: produced by local and central governments and governmental agencies.

Hard statistics are objective: cannot be fiddled: like births and marriages.

Soft statistics are more subjective and can be fiddled: data on crime, poverty, education, unemployment.

Social trends – was a collection of government surveys published annually until 2012.

The UK Census is a survey of every household every 10 years. Every household completes it, by law.

CSEW (Crime Survey for England and Wales) – victims of crime, collected by a questionnaire.

Non-official statistics = collected by organisations other than the government: for example, TV ratings collected by the British Audience Research Bureau, and surveys that are conducted by special interest groups, such as charities.

2 – Documents and mass media

A written text, either on paper or in a digital format (like text messages).

Documents can be **personal** – such as letters, diaries, autobiographies and biographies.

Documents can also be **official** like school and health records, and public documents produced by various charities and businesses.

Documents can be **expressive** – like in a diary, or formal, like official documents.

Content analysis – can be used to analyse quantitative data based on the meaning attached to it, often used to study the mass media: to count words, frequency of a term used etc.

Documents can be difficult to understand especially if they are old, they might be fake or contain lies.

3 – Sociologists compare different secondary documents

Look for similarities versus differences between various documents, comparing different times, cultures, groups, institutions.

Researchers can analyse real social behaviour and make comparisons without having to set up experimental conditions.

Durkheim – used this comparative method in his famous 1897 study on suicide: he examined rates of suicide in different European cities and found that it was consistent over time but varied between societies and different groups within the same society.

↓ Ethical issues

Problems and considerations relating to the morality of the research.

Deception.

Informed consent.

Protection from harm, both physical and psychological.

Anonymity, confidentiality and privacy.

Some methods involve significant ethical issues, such as covert participant observation compared with using official statistics.

Social policy

Social policy relates to social problems and how social institutions respond to them. It is reliant on using research to inform governments and various organisations and influence their response to social problems.

The term **social policy** refers to a wide range of policies (political proposals) that are specifically designed to reform and improve society. Thus, the idea of applications based on research findings and conclusions. And the link with political outputs/legislation.

Highly relevant to welfare policies and those that influence social services and social care.

Giddens (2001) believed that sociological research has four practical purposes:

- 1 – Understanding of the world and society.
- 2 – A heightened awareness of the needs of specific groups.
- 3 – An assessment of ‘what works’, evidence-based policy.
- 4 – An increased personal knowledge of ourselves and others.

Max Weber regarded the relationship between sociology and social policy as follows: policy makers could turn to sociologists for evidence, but sociologists should not set out to influence policy making and policy makers. The question of boundaries between the political system and social organisations and the academia.

Sociologists are academics and should not act as politicians. This is very important with regard to how democracy works, including separation of powers. However, in democracy various groups and organisations can work to influence decision making and policy choices. It is a delicate balance.

Weber argued that it is important that sociologists maintain rigorous methods so they can provide useful and reliable evidence.

Research can help determine whether a proposed policy is likely to be effective and beneficial. It is very similar to ‘marketing research’. The question then becomes, effective based on what objectives? What do we wish to achieve by proposing and implementing a policy = enter the realm of ethical normative considerations because any specific objective or policy is the same as declaring: this is good and justified, and such mindset is inherently ethical.

Social policy and conflict theories

Marxists traditionally argued that social policy cannot resolve social problems because these problems and all other society's ills are the direct result of capitalism itself = the infrastructure determines the superstructure. Thus, the 'treatment' is to change the economic system at its core, to communism. The treatment is not even changing the capitalist system, because any economic system except communism leads to inequality, thus, the only solution is the revolution, and therefore not reforms either. Remember the dialectic feature of Marxism is relevant to all previous economic systems not only capitalism.

According to traditional Marxists, sociologists supporting government policy choices are essentially complicit in perpetuating inequality and the rotten system.

Not all Marxists agree with this argument: some argue that the state can be relatively independent of the ruling class, and consequently sociologists may be helping governmental organisations to do good. Some are less inclined to the utopic revolution and more towards reforms, but it is nevertheless still predicated on arguments regarding the class conflict and its inequality.

Feminists = especially radical feminists argue a similar argument to traditional Marxists = the system is rotten to the core and thus needs to change at its core. Social problems are caused by patriarchy, and reforms would not change that, on the contrary, it would create the illusion of improvements where none exist. However, different strands of feminism have different views and by extension, different applications.

Both Marxists and feminists, in general, have a meta-argument about the nature of society and the source of its problems, thus any change needs to address the root cause of the problem – ruling class and patriarchy. If the argument is structural, it also follows that the change required is at a fundamental structural level.

Contemporary views on social policy

Three key perspectives, New Right, Social Democrats and the Third Way, all argue that sociology could and should influence policy; and all have influenced policy under different governments.

New Right = influenced particularly Conservative governments from 1979 onwards.

Social democrats = particularly influenced Labour governments, but less influential on the New Labour government of Tony Blair.

The Social Democratic Party (SDP) is a political party in the United Kingdom established in 1990. Ideologically, the SDP combines social conservatism with centre-left economic policy and support for a social market economy alongside Euroscepticism.

The Third Way = particularly associated with Anthony Giddens, a major influence on Tony Blair's New Labour government on 1997.

Giddens, a sociologist and a director of the London School of Economics, was a pivotal influence in shaping the **Third Way**. These policies were in contrast to the emerging power of New Right during the 1970s and 1980s.

He argued that the old class-based division of left and right is no longer relevant, and the government needs to adapt to a powerful global financial reality. Giddens encouraged Labour not to avoid policies that might be considered 'conservative'. Tony Blair embraced the Third Way by rejecting the idea that everything needs to be left to the free forces of the market, and at the same time he regarded the left-of-centre ideas of state intervention to be outdated.

Similar orientation was embraced by Bill Clinton.

Postmodernists

While there is no single postmodernist attitude regarding social policy, it is generally believed that postmodernists reject the idea that sociologists should seek to influence policy. In fact, they reject the idea that society ought to be 'improved' and move towards a future of being a good society, because that is a modernist idea.

Lyotard argued that justifying policy using scientific research has the potential to be oppressive, because it is merely a justification for a meta-narrative claiming to discover social facts when in truth it is examining social constructs. Postmodernists argue that policy that is predicated on evidence is generally used not to improve life but rather to silence an open debate and discussion similarly to tyranny.

In summary

Structuralist, positivist, macro =

- Functionalists, traditional Marxists.
- Quantitative and reliable methods.
- Primary methods: questionnaires, structured interviews, non-participants observations and experiments.
- Secondary research methods: official statistics.

Social action, interpretivists, micro =

- Interactionists, postmodernists.
- Qualitative, validity.
- Primary methods: semi-structured interviews, non-participants observations, participants observations.
- Secondary research methods = personal and historical documents.

Theory and methods in context

Check revision guide Theory and Methods for exam bands requirements. P. 43.

These questions always have the same structure.

There is an 'item' with some information about a sociological study in education followed by the task:

Applying material from item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using '*research method*' to investigate a '*topic from education*'.

The most important thing to remember when answering these questions is to *contextualise*.

General advantages and disadvantages of the method can be useful but you should try and contextualise as many points as possible by asking:

Who? What? Where?

Who is being researched?

What is the topic?

Where is the location (usually a school)?

What particular characteristics do these people, subjects and places have that might influence the effectiveness of the suggested research method?

Copied below, See examples pp.44-45:

✚ For every point below you could extrapolate other points of discussion.

(1) The hidden curriculum

“This is something that takes place within schools, so would require access to a school and/or teachers. There are likely to be gatekeepers for researching within a school, particularly the head teacher. This would be a practical issue relating to most plausible research methods for researching a topic.

The ‘hidden’ nature of the hidden curriculum might be a barrier to gaining valid data. While some aspects of the so-called ‘hidden curriculum’ might well be official policy (such as promoting British values, or encouraging good timekeeping skills) potentially controversial elements of the hidden curriculum would be harder to uncover. Teachers and managers are unlikely to speak openly about such things in an interview, for example, leaving this perhaps to the interpretation of an observer, or the opinions of pupils.

(2) Differential achievement

The facts of differential achievement are readily available through official statistics. These are data which are routinely collected, and so it is possible to discover ethnic differences in achievement, gender differences in achievement and (slightly more problematically) class differences. Class differences are harder to find because of the problem of operationalising class. Details such as whether a pupil is in receipt of free school meals or brings in pupil premium funding is likely to be used, whereas ethnicity and gender is more clear-cut. There may, however, be some missing data on ethnicity.

However, if the researcher is looking for the reasons for differential achievement, then official statistics are less useful. They are (arguably) reliable, but not valid – they do not offer *verstehen*. The research characteristics of the reasons for differential achievement will depend on whether the researcher is considering in-school or out-of-school factors. For in-school factors, see the next two sections for examples of the sort of issues that might arise. Out-of-school factors bring their own research issues. Official statistics might offer some insight about issues such as whether English is a first language or there are housing problems, but it would not always be possible to marry this with the achievement data. There are gatekeepers at home – notably parents – who might be unwilling to contribute to this sort of research. The issues might be sensitive, and therefore difficult to access. Parents and pupils might worry about being judged or criticised.

(3) Teacher labelling

As previously mentioned, any research conducted in schools must get past gatekeepers in the form of head teacher and, quite possibly, governors and parents too. If pupils who are under 18 are to be involved in the research, parents will need to give consent, not just the pupils.

Teachers are unlikely to be honest about labelling pupils. Labelling is unprofessional and (in some cases) possibly illegal; and however anonymous the research, they might worry about their jobs. So interviewing teachers is unlikely to yield valid results. Pupils might not recognise whether or not they have been labelled and other pupils might use the opportunity to discuss this issue to target certain teachers unfairly. Again, the validity of the data would come under question. Observation then might be a better opportunity, but of course if the observation were overt then the teacher would act differently and try and avoid obvious labelling (even if they were not fully aware that that was the purpose of the observation). To observe lessons covertly then brings with it all the ethical issues, made worse by the fact that most of those being observed would be minors.

We know this topic has been studied via field experiments (particularly relating to the self-fulfilling prophecy) but this too raised ethical issues and potentially interfered with children's education. It is better to observe what is actually happening rather than to create a false situation, even in the field.

(4) Anti-school subcultures

Again, gatekeepers might prevent the research from taking place, especially as schools would tend not to want to acknowledge the existence of anti-school subcultures in their midst.

Operationalising concepts such as 'anti-school' and 'subculture' would make some research methods problematic, including questionnaires or interviews. The people being interviewed might not understand the terminology or might not recognise what a sociologist would recognise as an anti-school subculture.

Observations would be problematic, if overt, because pupils will not behave as they would normally. They would be likely to associate the researchers with school and authority which might lead them to hide bad behaviour from them or be very hostile to the researcher. They might even play up more because of having an audience. Whatever reaction occurred, this would be an example of the Hawthorne effect. There could be an equivalent reaction with other methods. For example, group interviews might see pupils trying to impress their peers with anti-school messages; and in interviews or questionnaires pupils might exaggerate their deviant behaviour in order to impress or shock, or might disguise it in fear of punishment.

(5) Education policy

There is endless detail about education policy in documents, from the policies and laws themselves to considerable media discussion of the policies and their impact. The policies and laws themselves might reveal little about their real intent (e.g. the 1988 Education Act does not mention marketisation). Media reports are likely to be politically biased either in favour of or against a policy because of their attitude to the party or government.

Official statistics might be an appropriate way to measure the impact of education policies (e.g. changes in differential achievement in the wake of a policy being implemented) but this would present a few problems. First, observing a correlation does not prove causation. It would not be a valid conclusion to say that the introduction of more coursework at GCSE caused girls' marks to increase just because there is evidence of a correlation. To reach such a conclusion would require some triangulation to gain some data that showed that girls preferred coursework and performed better than boys on those sorts of tasks. There is also the risk that statistics might be politically manipulated in order to produce a certain desirable outcome.

Other possible methods, such as interviews with teachers, also have the problem of bias: most teachers dislike most educational reforms!"

