

As we saw in Topic 3, one view of science is that it produces true knowledge. According to this view, scientists take a detached and objective approach to their research. They don't allow their own subjective values to get in the way of discovering the facts.

Everyone has values – beliefs, opinions and prejudices. Our values are influenced by many factors, including our class, gender, ethnicity, upbringing and experiences.

Given that sociologists are also members of society, can they study it objectively and without bias, unaffected by their own personal values? Can sociologists' research be 'value free' – free from contamination or distortion by their values?

- Some argue that it is both *possible and desirable* to keep subjective values out of research to produce true, scientific knowledge about society.
- Others argue that, because sociologists are humans (with values) studying other humans (with values), it is *impossible* to keep personal values out of one's research.
- Some go further, arguing that it is actually *desirable* for sociologists to use their values to improve society through their work. This is called 'committed sociology'.

In this Topic, we explore the answers different sociologists have given to the question of whether sociology can or should be objective and value-free.

The classical sociologists and values

The classical thinkers who shaped sociology in its early years, such as Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber, all had views on the question of objectivity and value freedom.

The early positivists

For the early positivists Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), the creation of a better society was not a matter of subjective values or personal opinions about what was 'best'. They shared the Enlightenment or modernist view of the role of sociology. As the science of society, sociology's job was to discover the truth about how society works, uncovering the laws that govern its proper functioning. Equipped with this knowledge, social problems could be solved and human life improved.

In their view, scientific sociology would reveal the one correct society. This gave sociologists a crucial role. By discovering the truth about how society worked, sociologists would be able to say objectively and with scientific certainty what was really best for society – they would be able to prescribe how things ought to be. In fact, Comte regarded sociology as the 'queen of the sciences' and saw sociologists as latter-day priests of a new scientific religion of truth.

Karl Marx

There is debate about whether or not Karl Marx (1818–83) was a positivist. However, it is certainly true that he saw himself as a scientist and that he believed his method of historical analysis, historical materialism, could reveal the line of development of human society. This development involved an evolution through a series of different types of class-based society, leading ultimately to a future classless communist society, in which exploitation, alienation and poverty would be ended, and each individual would be free to achieve their true potential.

The role of Marx's sociology, therefore, was to reveal the truth of this development, especially to the proletariat, since they would be the class to overthrow capitalism and herald the birth of communist society. Marx thus takes for granted the value of the ideal communist society and argues that his scientific approach will show us how to reach it. In this he is similar to Comte and Durkheim, in that he sees science as helping to 'deliver' the good society.

Max Weber

Marx, Durkheim and Comte made no distinction between the facts as revealed by science and the values that we should hold – since they believed that science could tell us what these values should be. By contrast, Max Weber (1864–1920) makes a sharp distinction between value judgments and facts and he argues that we cannot derive the one from the other.

For example, research might show that divorcees are more likely to commit suicide. However, this fact does not demonstrate the truth of the value judgment that we should make divorce harder to obtain. There is nothing about the fact that logically compels us to accept the value. For example, we might argue that we should instead make it harder to get married (another value), or that people have every right to commit suicide if they wish (a third value). None of these value judgments are 'proven' by the established fact. Indeed, in Weber's view, a value can be neither proved nor disproved by the facts: they belong to different realms.

However, despite making a sharp distinction between facts and values, Weber still saw an essential role for values in sociological research. We can divide his views into four stages of the research process.



Afghanistan: US marine gathering intelligence. Should sociologists work with the military?

GETTING STARTED

On your own:

1 Note down what you understand by the term 'values'.

Working in pairs, answer the following questions:

- 2 Compare your answers to Question 1 with your partner. Do you agree with each other?
- 3 What values do you associate with the following sociologists?
 - a feminists
 - b Marxists
 - c functionalists
 - d the New Right
- 4 In what ways do the topics they choose to study reflect these values? Give an example for each perspective.
- 5 How might their values also affect what their research finds or the conclusions they draw from their research?

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Understand the meaning of objectivity, subjectivity and value freedom.
- Know the main views put forward of the relationship between sociology and values.
- Be able to evaluate the strengths and limitations of different views as to whether sociology can and should be value-free.

1 Values as a guide to research

Weber took the idea from phenomenology that social reality is made up of a 'meaningless infinity' of facts that make it impossible to study it in its totality. Therefore the best the researcher can do is to select certain facts and study these.

But how do we choose which facts to study? In Weber's view, we can only select them in terms of what we regard as important based on our own values – in other words, their *value relevance* to us.

Values are thus essential in enabling us to select which aspects of reality to study and in developing concepts with which to understand these aspects. For example, feminists value gender equality and this leads them to study women's oppression and to develop concepts such as patriarchy with which to understand it.

2 Data collection and hypothesis testing

While values are essential in selecting what to study, in Weber's view we must be as objective and unbiased as possible when we are actually collecting the facts, keeping our values and prejudices out of the process.

For example, we should not ask leading questions designed to give the answers that we *want* to hear: our questions should aim to get respondents to give us their view, not our own.

Once we have gathered the facts, we can use them to test a hypothesis. Again, we must keep our values out of the process – the hypothesis must stand or fall solely on whether or not it fits the observed facts.

Value freedom and commitment

The issue of commitment that Weber raised has remained at the centre of debates about the place of the sociologist's values in research. For example, some modern positivists have shied away from any value commitments.

By contrast, Marxists, interactionists and feminists have argued for a 'committed sociology' in which the sociologist spells out the importance of their values to their research.

Modern positivists

Unlike Durkheim and Comte, who were openly committed to re-shaping society in certain ways, by the mid 20th century positivists tended to argue that their own values were irrelevant to their research. There were two reasons for this:

3 Values in the interpretation of data

Values become important again when we come to interpret the data we have collected. The facts need to be set in a theoretical framework so that we can understand their significance and draw conclusions from them. In Weber's view, our choice of theoretical framework or perspective is influenced by our values. Therefore, we must be explicit about them, spelling out our values so that others can see if unconscious bias is present in our interpretation of our data.

4 Values and the sociologist as a citizen

Research findings often have very real effects on people's lives, but sociologists and scientists sometimes choose to ignore the uses to which their work is put. They argue that their job is merely to conduct objective research and discover the facts; it is for the politicians or public to decide what use to make of their findings.

Weber rejects this view. He argues that scientists and sociologists are also human beings and citizens and they must not dodge the moral and political issues their work raises by hiding behind words such as 'objectivity' or 'value freedom'. They must take moral responsibility for the harm their research may do. For example, Einstein's theories helped make the atomic bomb possible; yet subsequently he spoke out against nuclear weapons.

To summarise, Weber sees values as relevant to the sociologist in choosing what to research, in interpreting the data collected and in deciding the use to which the findings should be put. By contrast, the sociologist's values must be kept out of the actual process of fact gathering.

critical discipline, often challenging accepted authority. However, by the 1950s, sociologists were no longer 'problem makers' who defined their own research problems. Instead they had become 'problem takers' who hired themselves out to organisations such as business and the military, to take on and solve their problems for them.

Gouldner argues that, by leaving their own values behind them, sociologists were making a 'gentleman's promise' that they would not rock the boat by criticising their paymasters. Because they were simply hired hands, they saw their own values as irrelevant. This is exactly the attitude that Weber was criticising when he said that sociologists must take moral responsibility for the effects of their work.

Activity Media

Social scientists and the military

...go to www.sociologyuk.com

Committed sociology

By contrast with the positivists, some sociologists argue for a committed sociology. For example, Gunnar Myrdal (1969) argues that sociologists should not only spell out their values – as Weber recommends – they should also openly 'take sides' by espousing the values and interests of particular individuals or groups.

Committed sociologists who advocate this approach, such as Myrdal and Gouldner, argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to keep values out of research. In Gouldner's view, value-free sociology is:

- impossible, because either the sociologist's own values, or those of their paymasters, are bound to be reflected in their work.
- undesirable, since without values to guide research, sociologists are merely selling their services to the highest bidder. For example, Gouldner argues that:

'From such a standpoint, there is no reason why one cannot sell his knowledge to spread a disease just as freely as he can to fight it. Indeed, some sociologists have had no hesitation about doing market research designed to sell more cigarettes, although well aware of the implications of recent cancer research.'

Whose side are we on?

If all sociology is influenced by values, this means the sociologist must inevitably take sides. By not choosing a side, the sociologist is in fact taking the side of the more powerful against the less powerful.

The interactionist Howard Becker (1970) asks, 'Whose side are we on?' He argues that values are always

present in sociology. Traditionally, however, positivists and functionalists have tended to take the viewpoint of powerful groups – police, psychiatrists and so on.

Becker argues that instead of seeing things from the perspective of these 'overdogs', sociologists should adopt a compassionate stance and take the side of the underdogs – the criminals, mental patients and other powerless groups. This is partly because less is known about these groups and their story needs to be told in order to redress the balance. By identifying with the underdog and giving them a voice, we can reveal a previously hidden side of social reality.

For example, by empathising with the mental patient, we can show the hidden rationality of behaviour that the psychiatrist thinks of as irrational. In fact, as the interactionist Erving Goffman (1968) argues, to describe the situation of the mental patient faithfully, we have to take their side. We have to be biased in favour of the patient and against the psychiatrist.

This emphasis on identifying and empathising with the powerless has clear links to the kinds of research methods favoured by interactionists. They have a strong preference for qualitative methods such as participant observation, which they see as revealing the meanings of these 'outsiders'.

However, Gouldner criticises Becker for taking a romantic and sentimental approach to disadvantaged groups. He accuses Becker of being concerned only with those who are 'on their backs' – the misunderstood, negatively labelled, exotic specimens of deviant behaviour.

Instead, Gouldner adopts a Marxist perspective. He argues that sociologists should take the side of those who are 'fighting back' – the political radicals struggling to change society. Sociology should not confine itself to describing the viewpoint of the underdog. It should be committed to ending their oppression by unmasking the ways in which the powerful maintain their position.

Funding and careers

Most sociological research is funded by someone other than sociologists themselves. Funding sources include government departments, businesses and voluntary organisations. Often, the body that pays for the research controls the direction it takes and the kinds of questions it asks – and fails to ask. Thus the sociologist's work is likely to embody the values and interests of their paymasters. Sometimes, funding bodies may block publication of the research if its findings prove unacceptable.

Sociologists may also wish to further their careers and reputations, and this may influence their choice of topic (for example, choosing something that is in fashion), their research questions and how they interpret their findings. Some may censor themselves for fear that being too outspoken will harm their career prospects or even cost

them their job. Sociologists in university departments are also likely to be under pressure to publish research, perhaps regardless of its quality or usefulness.

For Gouldner, all research is inevitably influenced by values – whether it is the values of the sociologist, or those of the funding body that pays for the research.

Perspectives and methods

Different sociological perspectives can be seen as embodying different assumptions and values about how society is or should be. For example:

- Feminism sees society as based on gender inequality and promotes the rights of women.
- Functionalism sees society as harmonious and espouses conservative values that favour the status quo.
- Marxism sees society as conflict-ridden and strives for a classless society.

These assumptions and values influence the topics that sociologists of different perspectives choose to research, the concepts they develop and the conclusions they reach. For example, functionalists have concluded that inequality is beneficial for society, whereas Marxists conclude that it produces exploitation of the poor by the rich.

Similarly, there is a link between sociologists' methods and their value-stance. For example, interactionists' preference for qualitative methods fits with their desire to empathise with the underdog, since such methods give them access to the actor's meanings. Likewise, the functionalist and positivist tendency to take the side of the 'establishment' and the viewpoint of those in authority fits with their uncritical acceptance of official statistics produced by government. Thus both interactionists and functionalists can be accused of selecting methods that produce facts that reflect their values and outlook.

Objectivity and relativism

If all perspectives involve values, are their findings just a reflection of their values, rather than a true picture of society? If so, there would be no way of deciding which of these different versions of reality – if any – was true.

One version of this idea is known as relativism. Relativism argues that:

- Different groups, cultures and individuals – including sociologists – have different views as to what is true. Each sees the world in their own way, through their own perspectives, concepts, values and interests.
- There is no independent way of judging whether any view is truer than any other.

All sociologists would agree with the first statement. For example, as we saw in Chapter 1, different cultures hold

often widely different religious beliefs that affect what they believe to be true.

However, relativism goes much further. It argues that there is no absolute or objective truth – just truths plural. What you believe is true, is true – for you. What I believe is true, is true – but only for me. So if you believe the earth is round, while I think it is flat, there is no way of saying who is right.

Relativism and postmodernism

In sociology, postmodernists take a relativist view of knowledge. They reject the idea that any one account of the social world is superior to any other – there are no 'privileged accounts' that have special access to the truth. Any perspective that claims to have the truth, such as Marxism, is just a meta-narrative or 'big story'. All knowledge, from whatever perspective, is based on values and assumptions and thus no perspective has any special claim to be true.

Of course, if this is correct, then it must apply to postmodernism too – which leads to the paradoxical conclusion that we shouldn't believe what postmodernism says either! In other words, relativism is self-defeating, since it claims to be telling us something true, while simultaneously telling us that no one can tell us what is true.

In practice, sociologists rarely go this far. After all, there is a real factual world 'out there', in which women generally do more housework than men, in which ethnic background may affect a person's life chances and so on. Regardless of our values, we can observe and record these facts. And once we have established the existence of such facts, they can be used to judge the worth of competing theories. In the end, it matters less whether a theory contains certain values, than whether it can explain the world we observe.

Topic summary

The early positivists and Marx believed we could discover objective scientific knowledge and use it to improve society. Weber argued that values are essential in deciding what to research, in interpreting findings and in determining how they should be used, but must be kept out of the data-collection process. However, 20th century positivists claimed to be 'value-free', leading Gouldner to accuse them of being subservient to their paymasters. Becker argues that sociologists should take the side of the underdog. The values of those funding the research play a part in determining what gets researched. Sociologists' own values influence the kinds of research questions they ask, their methods and findings.

EXAMINING OBJECTIVITY AND VALUES IN SOCIOLOGY

QuickCheck Questions

- 1 According to Weber, which is the stage of research into which values must not be allowed to enter?
- 2 True or false? Relativism argues that everyone's view of the world is equally valid.
- 3 What is Gouldner's main criticism of modern positivist sociologists?

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net

- 4 Why do interactionists argue we should see things from the point of view of the underdog?
- 5 Explain what is meant by 'objectivity'.
- 6 Why do many sociologists wish to be seen as scientific?

Questions to try

Item A

Some sociologists argue that their research should take the side of the underdog. For example, Becker points out that traditionally, sociology has tended to take the side of powerful groups in society, often accepting their view of the world. As a result, the standpoints of less powerful groups have been largely hidden. Becker therefore argues that sociology should identify with the underdog, empathise with them and uncover their view of the world.

However, others have argued that there is no place for values in sociology and that sociologists should take an objective, 'value-neutral' approach to research.

- 1 Outline and explain two criticisms of the claim that sociologists can keep values out of their research. (10 marks)
- 2 Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the view that sociologists should 'take the side of the underdog' and be committed to changing society. (20 marks)

The Examiner's Advice

Q1 Spend about 15 minutes on this question. Divide your time fairly equally between the two criticisms. You don't need a separate introduction; just start on your first criticism. Possible criticisms include the view that values are essential in choosing research topics or in interpreting research findings; that choice of research method involves values, and the influence of the values of those who fund the research.

Choose two criticisms and describe each of these in some detail, explaining how it criticises the claim that sociologists can keep values out of research. Do this by creating a 'chain of reasoning' (see Box 4.1 in chapter 4). For example, Weber argues that social reality is a meaningless infinity of facts and so it would be impossible for the sociologist to study it all. This means that sociologists have to use their values to select what is important to study.

You can apply examples of how different perspectives choose to study different topics based on their values. Use concepts and issues such as value relevance, data interpretation, choice of method, and influence of theoretical perspective.

Q2 Spend about 30 minutes on this question. Keep focused on whether it is desirable for values to enter into research, rather than on whether it is possible to keep them out. Explain the different views of this issue, including those of Weber, positivists, Becker, Gouldner and postmodernists.

Apply material from the item where possible, linking this to your own knowledge. Use examples from other topic areas such as crime and deviance or from sociological perspectives, but make sure you apply them to the issue of values. Create a chain of reasoning. For example, Becker argues that functionalists and positivists have taken the side of the powerful, distorting our view of social reality. Sociologists should redress the balance by using empathetic methods to give voice to the underdogs.

Use concepts and issues such as value freedom, moral responsibility of sociologists as citizens, revealing underdogs' meanings, empathetic research, the influence of theoretical perspective, committed sociology, objectivity, science, funding, careers and relativism. Rather than leaving evaluation to a separate 'block' at the end, evaluate each view as you go.