



Campaigning against homelessness: who has more influence on policy – campaign groups or sociologists?

Social policy is generally thought of as the plans and actions of governments to tackle 'social problems', especially the welfare of the population in areas such as education and health. Many sociologists are interested in solving social problems and much of their research produces policy proposals for government to act upon.

In this Topic, we examine the relationship between sociology and social policy. For example:

- Should it be the job of sociologists to influence social policies?
- What kinds of policies do different perspectives favour?
- How far does sociological research actually influence policies?

Social problems and sociological problems

In order to understand the role of sociology in relation to social policy, it is useful to distinguish first between social problems and sociological problems.

Social problems

According to Peter Worsley (1977), 'a social problem is some piece of social behaviour that causes public friction and/or private misery and calls for collective action to solve it'.

For example, poverty, educational underachievement, juvenile delinquency and divorce may all be seen as social problems by members of society, and governments may be called upon to produce policies to tackle them.

Sociological problems

According to Worsley, a sociological problem is 'any pattern of relationships that calls for explanation'. In other words, it is any piece of behaviour that we wish to make sense of.

This might be something that society regards as a social problem, for example why some people are poor or commit crime. But it can also include behaviour that society doesn't normally regard as a problem – for example, why people are prosperous or law-abiding. As Worsley puts it:

'From the point of view of the State or the neighbours, quiet families are not problem families. Sociologically speaking, they are.'

In other words, 'normal' behaviour is just as interesting to sociologists as behaviour that people see as a social problem. In fact, some sociologists show little or no interest in solving social problems. They see their goal as being to discover knowledge for its own sake.

On the other hand, many sociologists are interested in solving social problems through their research. For example, sociologists who feel strongly about poverty have conducted research aimed at discovering solutions. Similarly, many sociologists are employed directly by government departments such as the Home Office. These sociologists often have a direct input into making policies and evaluating their effectiveness, for example in reducing crime.

Application

Suggest three examples of behaviour that are usually regarded as normal rather than as problems. Why might sociologists be interested in them?

GETTING STARTED

Working in pairs, complete the following tasks:

- 1 Make a list of as many social problems as you can (for example, homelessness).
- 2 For three of the social problems you have identified, suggest a way in which government might intervene to overcome them (for example, providing shelters for the homeless).
- 3 Make a list of any pressure groups that might have an interest in influencing policy in this area (for example, charities such as Shelter).
- 4 What specific questions could sociologists try to answer through their research that might help governments to solve the social problems you have identified?
- 5 Governments often have a different view of social problems and their solution from the views of sociologists. For the problems you have chosen, suggest reasons why this might be the case.

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Understand the difference between social problems and sociological problems.
- Know the factors that may affect the extent to which sociology can influence social policy.
- Know the main sociological perspectives on the relationship between sociology and social policy, and be able to evaluate their strengths and limitations.

The influence of sociology on policy

However, even when sociologists do conduct research into social problems, there is no guarantee that policy-makers will study their findings, or that any solutions they propose will find their way into social policies. Many factors may affect whether or not sociological research succeeds in influencing policy:

- **Electoral popularity** Research findings and recommendations might point to a policy that would be unpopular with voters.
- **Ideological and policy preferences of governments** If the researcher's value-stance or perspective is similar to the political ideology of the government, they may stand more chance of influencing its policies.
- **Interest groups** These are pressure groups that seek to influence government policies in their own interests. For

example, business groups may succeed in persuading government not to raise the minimum wage, even though this might reduce poverty.

- **Globalisation** Social policy isn't just made by nation states in isolation. International organisations such as the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may influence the social policies of individual governments. For example, the IMF's 'structural adjustment programmes' have required less developed countries to introduce fees for education and health care as a condition for aid, despite evidence from social scientists that this makes development less likely.
- **Critical sociology** Sociologists who are critical of the state and powerful groups, such as Marxists, may be

regarded as too extreme, hostile or impractical and therefore unlikely to influence policy.

- **Cost** Even if the government is sympathetic to the sociologist's findings, it may not have sufficient funds to implement an appropriate policy based on them, or it may have other spending priorities and commitments.
- **Funding sources** In some cases, sociologists may tone down their findings and policy recommendations so as to fit in with their paymasters' wishes – a case of 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. Similarly, policymakers may recruit sociologists who share their assumptions and political values. The research findings may then be used to justify what the policymakers intended to do in the first place. Similarly, 'think tanks' or research institutes often have particular political sympathies – for example, some are seen as left leaning, while others have right-wing sympathies. Politicians seeking a particular result to justify their favoured policies can be selective in which think tanks they turn to for research.

In addition to any direct influence on policymakers, social scientists' ideas sometimes become part of mainstream culture and influence the way people see social problems.

This in turn can affect the policies that governments produce. For example, John Bowlby's (1965) idea that young children's relationships with their mother are crucial for normal development became widely accepted by many people. When this happens, it can influence the climate of opinion in favour of policies that reflect these social science-derived ideas. In the example above, it may have influenced policies on day care, young offenders and so on.

The power to define the problem

Sociological research is thus only one possible element in shaping social policy. Ultimately, any policy is the result of a political decision by those in power. As Tom Burden (1998) says, social policies:

'cannot be very well understood if they are simply treated as "neutral" attempts to deal with "problems". Indeed, what is to count as a problem is itself generally a matter of political debate.'

Often, those with power are the ones who are able to define what is and what is not a problem, and what if anything should be done about it.

Perspectives on social policy and sociology

Different sociological perspectives hold different views of the nature of the state and the social policy it produces. As a result, each perspective tends to take a different view of the role of sociology in relation to social policy. We shall now examine the major perspectives on policy and its relationship to sociology.

Positivism and functionalism

Early positivists such as Comte and Durkheim took the view that sociology was a science and would discover both the cause of social problems and scientifically based solutions to them. As such, their approach was part of the Enlightenment project to use science and reason to improve society. For example, Durkheim's analysis led him to propose a meritocratic education system and the abolition of inherited wealth as ways to foster a sense that society was fair, which would promote social cohesion.

Functionalists see society as based on value consensus and free from fundamental conflicts. Like the positivists, they see the state as serving the interests of society as a whole, producing and implementing rational social policies for the good of all. These policies help society run more smoothly and efficiently. For example, educational policies are seen as promoting equal opportunity and social integration, while health and housing policies assist the family in performing its functions more effectively.

For both functionalists and positivists, the sociologist's role is to provide the state with objective, scientific information. By investigating social problems and discovering their causes, sociologists provide the necessary information on which the state can base its policies.

In this view, the sociologist is rather like the medical researcher. Just as medical research discovers the causes of disease as a basis for prevention or cure, so the sociologist's role is to investigate social problems scientifically. This provides the state with objective information about their extent and explanations of their causes as well as possible 'cures' in the shape of policy recommendations.

Functionalists favour social policies that are sometimes referred to as 'piecemeal social engineering'. In other words, they favour a cautious approach, tackling one specific issue at a time.

However, the piecemeal approach has been criticised. For example, Marxists argue that educational policies aimed at equalising opportunity for children of different classes are often defeated by the influence of poverty in wider society. In other words, social problems such as underachievement are simply aspects of a wider structure of class inequality, and so we need to change the basic structure of society in order to solve these specific problems.

The social democratic perspective

The social democratic perspective on social policy shares this view. It favours a major redistribution of wealth and income from the rich to the poor. Sociologists adopting this perspective, such as Peter Townsend (1979), argue that they should be involved in researching social problems and making policy recommendations to eradicate them. For example, Townsend conducted research on poverty. On the basis of his findings, he made recommendations for policies such as higher benefit levels, and more public spending on health, education and welfare.

Similarly, the Black Report (1980) on class inequalities in health made 37 far-reaching policy recommendations for reducing these deep-rooted inequalities. These included free school meals for all children, improved working conditions and more spending to improve housing. The Labour government had originally commissioned the report in 1977 but it was only completed in 1980, the year after Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government came to power. Her government refused to implement the report's recommendations on grounds of cost, and tried to restrict its publication.

Criticisms

Marxists criticise the social democratic perspective. While they agree that social problems such as class inequalities in health are deep-rooted, they reject the idea that even policies as far-reaching as those proposed by the Black Report are enough to solve the problem. In their view, it is capitalism that is ultimately responsible for these inequalities and so the problem cannot be solved without abolishing capitalism. They also argue that in any event, as the government response to the Black Report showed, the capitalist state is unlikely to introduce costly public spending policies to benefit the working class. Thus, rational social policies proposed by sociologists such as Townsend will fall on deaf ears as far as policymakers are concerned.

From a different perspective, postmodernists criticise attempts by sociologists to influence policy. For postmodernists, it is impossible to discover objective truth. All knowledge produced by research is uncertain, and so sociological findings cannot provide a satisfactory basis for policy-making. In this view, sociologists can only take the role of 'interpreters', offering one view of reality among many, and not the role of 'legislators' (lawmakers), as modernist sociologists such as functionalists and social democrats have tried to do.

Marxism

Marxists see society as divided by a fundamental conflict of interest in which the ruling capitalist class exploit the labour of the working class. Unlike functionalists, they do not see the state and its policies as benefiting all members of

society. In the Marxist view, the state represents the ruling class, and its social policies serve the interests of capitalism, not those of society as a whole:

- **Policies provide ideological legitimisation** to mask capitalist exploitation. For example, the welfare state gives capitalism a 'human face', making it appear that the system cares about the poor, sick and old.
- **They maintain the labour force for further exploitation** For example, the NHS serves capitalism by keeping workers fit enough to work.
- **They are a means of preventing revolution** when class conflict intensifies and threatens the stability of capitalism. For example, Marxists see the policies that created the welfare state after the Second World War (1939-45) as a way of buying off working-class opposition to capitalism.

Marxists recognise that social policies do sometimes provide real, if limited, benefits to the working class. However, such gains are constantly threatened with reversal by capitalism's tendency to go into periodic crises of profitability, leading to cuts in state spending on welfare.

Therefore, research that reveals the unpleasant truth about the social problems capitalism creates will not be used to formulate policies to solve these problems – as the fate of the Black Report shows. In fact, for Marxists, such problems cannot be solved by the capitalist state in any case, since capitalism is based on putting profits before human needs. The only solution to social problems is a revolution to overthrow capitalism and create a classless society.

For Marxists, therefore, the sociologist's main role should be to criticise capitalist social policy, not to serve the capitalist state. The sociologist must reveal the exploitation that underpins capitalism, and the way in which the ruling class use social policies to mask this exploitation and buy off revolt with minor concessions.

However, critics argue that Marxist views on social policy and the role of sociologists are impractical and unrealistic. Social democrats criticise them for rejecting the idea that research can help bring about progressive policies within the capitalist system. For example, poverty researchers have at times had some positive impact on policy.

Feminism

Like Marxists, feminists see society as based on conflict, but in their view the fundamental conflict is between genders, not classes. Society is patriarchal (male dominated), benefiting men at women's expense, and the state perpetuates women's subordination through its social policies.

For example, family policies may assume that the 'normal' family is a conventional nuclear family with a heterosexual married couple. Thus, if the state assumes this and offers benefits to married couples but not to cohabiting ones,

these policies may produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging the kind of family that the state assumed to be the norm in the first place and making it more difficult for people to live in other kinds of family.

Feminist research has had an impact in a number of policy areas. For example, in education, it has influenced policies such as learning materials that promote more positive images of females and training to sensitise teachers to the need to avoid gender bias.

Many of these policies reflect the liberal feminist view that anti-discrimination reforms will ultimately bring about gender equality.

On the other hand, radical feminist ideas have also had some influence on social policy. Radical feminists regard men as the direct oppressors of women, especially through the family. They therefore favour *separatism* – the idea that women need to separate themselves from men to be free from patriarchy. One policy that reflects this is refuges for women escaping domestic violence. For example, the Women's Aid Federation supports a national network of over 500 such services, often with funding from government.

Overall, it is clear that feminist sociological research has had some impact on social policies in areas that affect women, in part due to the success of the broader feminist movement in gaining greater political influence since the 1970s. However, many feminists reject the view that reformist social policies can liberate women. For example, both Marxist and radical feminists call for more far-reaching changes that the existing state cannot deliver.

The New Right

The New Right believe that the state should have only minimal involvement in society. In particular, they are opposed to using state provision of welfare to deal with social problems. In their view, state intervention in areas such as family life, income support, education and health care robs people of their freedom to make their own choices and undermines their sense of responsibility. This in turn leads to greater social problems, such as crime and delinquency.

For example, Charles Murray (1984) argues that generous welfare benefits act as 'perverse incentives' that weaken the family's self-reliance. They encourage the growth of a dependency culture and an underclass of lone mothers, undisciplined children, and irresponsible fathers who abandon their families. For this reason, Murray favours a reduction in state spending on welfare.

The New Right are therefore highly critical of many existing policies. However, they are not opposed to social policy as such, and they see the role of sociologists as being to propose alternative policies. These policies should aim to restore individuals' responsibility for their own welfare, rather than leaving it to the state.

For example, *Breakdown Britain*, a report by Conservative think tank, the Social Justice Policy Group (2007), proposes a range of new social policies aimed at the family. These include marriage preparation and parenting classes, and support from the tax and benefit system for mothers who stay at home. The report's main thrust is that governments have stripped citizens of responsibility for their own welfare and neglected the support networks that give people their quality of life. The role of social policy should be to enable people to help themselves, rather than the welfare state attempting, and failing, to do it for them.

Influence of New Right thinking

Because of its ideological opposition to the state having a major role in welfare, New Right thinking has tended to be particularly attractive to the Conservative Party. However, some Labour policies have shown the influence of New Right views. For example, New Labour regards a married couple as normally the best place to bring up children.

While not seeing a major role for the state in welfare, the New Right support a strong 'law and order' policy and research by right realists such as Wilson and Kelling has been influential in introducing zero tolerance policies.

However, the research used by the New Right has been questioned. For example, the validity of the data on which Murray bases his claims about a link between absent fathers and delinquency has been challenged. Similarly, New Right policy proposals often use the findings of politically sympathetic think tanks.

Activity Discussion

Differing perspectives on policy

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Topic Summary

Sociologists often research social problems, but many other factors influence policies. **Positivists and functionalists** see sociology as providing objective knowledge to guide policy for the good of society. **Social democrats** see sociology as proposing policies to make major structural changes, such as the abolition of poverty. **Marxists** argue that sociology must remain critical of the policies of the capitalist state. **Feminists** see policy as reflecting patriarchy and use research to influence policy in favour of women. The **New Right** propose policies to tackle the culture of dependency.

EXAMINING SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY

QuickCheck Questions

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net

- 1 Explain the difference between a social problem and a sociological problem.
- 2 Identify three factors affecting social policy apart from sociologists' research findings.
- 3 Which early sociologists argued that sociology should act as a guide to social policy?
- 4 Identify three ways in which Marxists see social policies as helping to maintain capitalism.
- 5 How might social research be affected by sources of funding?
- 6 Suggest three policies that feminist research may have influenced.

Questions to try

Item A

Early positivist sociologists believed that sociology was a 'science of society' that would enable us to discover the causes of social problems and offer solutions to them. Sociologists' research findings would then enable the state to implement appropriate social policies to deal with the problems. In the same way as medical research can discover cures for diseases, so sociological research would help solve society's problems.

However, Marxists claim that the main function of social policy is to maintain capitalism and that the role of sociologists should therefore be to criticise policy, not to serve the capitalist state.

- 1 Outline and explain two views of the role of social policy in society. (10 marks)
- 2 Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate different sociological perspectives' views of the relationship between sociology and social policy. (20 marks)

The Examiner's Advice

Q1 Spend about 15 minutes on this question. Divide your time fairly equally between the two views. You don't need a separate introduction; just start on your first view. Possible views of the role of social policy include positivist/functionalist, social democratic, Marxist, feminist and the New Right.

Choose two views and describe each view in some detail, explaining how it sees the role of social policy. Do this by creating a 'chain of reasoning' (see Box 4.1 in chapter 4). For example, New Right thinkers believe the state should have only a minimal role in society, leaving welfare to market forces instead. This means that they only advocate policies that give individuals responsibility for themselves or which control actions that threaten society.

Apply examples from topics such as the family, education or crime to illustrate your explanation. Use concepts and issues such as perverse incentives, dependency culture, right realism, zero tolerance, patriarchy, the self-fulfilling prophecy, capitalism, ideological legitimisation, maintaining the labour force for capitalism, preventing revolution, reducing inequality, value consensus, piecemeal social engineering.

Q2 Spend about 30 minutes on this question. This question is about the relationship between sociology and social policy. It refers to perspectives plural, so you need to consider two or more from the following: positivism, functionalism, the social democratic perspective, Marxism, feminism and the New Right. Explain the different perspectives' views, using concepts and issues referred to in the advice for Question 1, plus others such as social problems and sociological problems, sociology as a science, objectivity, and the role of the state.

Apply material from the Item where possible, linking this to your own knowledge. Use examples of policies from other topic areas such as education, the family or crime, but make sure you apply them to the relevant sociological perspectives on policy.

Rather than leaving evaluation to a separate 'block' at the end, evaluate as you go along. Your evaluation should focus on how each perspective sees the relationship between sociology and social policy, including what kind of influence sociology does have or should have on policy. You can also offer a final evaluative overview at the end of your answer.