Consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories

- Sociology as concerned with the problem of social order; consensus and conflict as broad differing approaches

- Examples of consensus approaches, e.g. Parsons; examples of conflict approaches, e.g. Marx

- Sociology as concerned with the problem of choice and determinism;

- Structural and social action theories as broad differing approaches

- Examples of structural theories, e.g. structural functionalism, Marx; examples of social action theories, e.g. symbolic Interactionism; phenomenology; examples of approaches attempting to integrate the two sets of theories, e.g. Giddens’s structuration theory.
During your AS-level Sociology studies, you met most of the main sociological theories. In this topic we will be drawing these ideas together and exploring them further.

This topic explores what are known as modernist theories. ‘Modernism’ or ‘modernity’ refers to a period of history in 19th and 20th century Western societies that was characterized by major technological, social and political advances. It was within this period and driven by these ideas of rational, progressive thought that sociology was born. The main modernist approaches are Marxism, functionalism and social action theory (Interactionism), and these have dominated sociology for much of the subject’s existence.

Modernist theories are divided into two main perspectives — structural approaches and social action approaches

Structural approaches attempt to provide a complete theory of society. They begin their analyses from the ‘top’, by looking first at society as a whole and then working down to the individual parts, and finally to individuals. There are two main structural theories:

Marxism or conflict theory (and its developments, Neo-Marxism), and Functionalism or consensus theory (and its developments, neo-functionalism). These theories may start from the same position, but they come to very different conclusions.

Social action theories do not seek to provide complete explanations for society; instead they start by looking at how society is ‘built up’ from people interacting with each other. Quite how far up they arrive is a matter of debate — though one version of social action theory, known as labelling theory, does seek to explain the construction of social rules.
Action perspective criticisms

From an action perspective, Dennis Wrong (1961) criticises functionalism’s ‘over-socialised’ or deterministic view of the individual. He describes the functionalist view as follows: the social system uses socialisation to shape people’s behaviour so that they will meet the system’s needs by performing their prescribed roles. Individuals have no free will or choice — they are mere puppets whose strings are pulled by the social system. From an action perspective, this is fundamentally mistaken. While functionalism sees human beings as shaped by society, the action approach takes the opposite view — that individuals create society by their interactions.

A related criticism is that functionalism reifies society — that is, treats it as a distinct ‘thing’ over and above individuals, with its own needs. By contrast, action approaches argue that society is not a thing ‘out there’ with its own independent existence. For them, the only social reality is the one that individuals construct by giving meaning to their worlds.

Postmodernist criticisms

Postmodernists argue that functionalism assumes that society is stable and orderly. As such, it cannot account for the diversity and instability that exist in today’s postmodern society.

In the postmodernist view, functionalism is an example of a meta-narrative or ‘big story’ that attempts to create a model of the workings of society as a whole. However, according to postmodernists, such an overall theory is no longer possible because today’s society is increasingly fragmented.

Conclusion

Functionalism seeks to answer the fundamental question of how social order is possible — even if its answer neglects conflict and is too deterministic. It can also be said that Merton’s move away from Parsons’ ‘grand theory’, his notion of dysfunctions, and his distinction between manifest and latent functions, all provide useful starting points for research. It is also true that many of functionalism’s critics — especially conflict theorists — end up ‘borrowing’ its basic notion that society is a system of interdependent parts.
**Alienation**

Marx believes that our true nature is based on our capacity to create things to meet our needs. Alienation is the result of our loss of control over our labour and its products and therefore our separation from our true nature. Alienation exists in all class societies, because the owners control the production process for their own needs. However, under capitalism alienation reaches its peak, for two reasons:

- Workers are completely separated from and have no control over the forces of production.
- The division of labour is at its most intense and detailed: the worker is reduced to an unskilled labourer mindlessly repeating a meaningless task.

**The state, revolution and communism**

Marx defines the state as ‘armed bodies of men’ — the army, police, prisons, courts and so on. The state exists to protect the interests of the class of owners who control it. As such, they form the *ruling class*. They use the state as a weapon in the class struggle, to protect their property, suppress opposition and prevent revolution. Any class that wishes to lead a revolution and become the economically dominant class must overthrow the existing ruling class.

Previous revolutions had always been one minority class overthrowing another, but in Marx’s view, the proletarian revolution that overthrows capitalism will be the first revolution by the majority against the minority. It will:

- Abolish the state and create a classless communist society.
- Abolish exploitation, replace private ownership with social ownership, and replace production for profit with production to satisfy human needs.
- End alienation as humans regain control of their labour and its products.

Marx predicted the ultimate victory of the proletarian evolution and the establishment of communist society on a world scale. He expected the revolution to occur first of all in the most advanced capitalist societies. However, he wrote relatively little about exactly how the revolution would come about. This has led to debate among Marxists ever since.

**Criticisms of Marx**

- Marx has a simplistic, one-dimensional view of inequality — he sees class as the only important division. Weber argues that status and power differences can also be important sources of inequality, independently of class. For example, a ‘power elite’ can rule without actually owning the means of production, as it did in the former Soviet Union. Similarly, feminists argue that gender is a more fundamental source of inequality than class.
Feminism sees society as male dominated and it seeks to describe, explain and change the position of women in society. It is therefore both a theory of women’s subordination and a political movement.

The roots of feminism, like those of other modernist theories, can be traced back to the late 18th century Enlightenment. This proclaimed universal principles of liberty and equality, along with the idea that human reason can liberate us from ignorance and create a better society.

Feminists argued that, since both sexes had the same power of reason, these principles should apply to women as much as to men and that women’s emancipation must be included as part of the Enlightenment project.

A ‘first wave’ of feminism appeared in the late 19th century, with the suffragettes’ campaign for the right to vote. The 1960s saw a ‘second wave’ emerge on a global scale.

Since then, feminism has had a major influence on sociology. Feminists criticise mainstream sociology for being ‘malestream’ — seeing society only from a male perspective. By contrast, feminists examine society from the viewpoint of women. Feminist sociologists see their work as part of the struggle against women’s subordination.

However, although all feminists oppose women’s subordination, there are disagreements among feminists about its causes and how to overcome it. In this section we concentrate on those feminist theories that have had most impact on sociology:

- Liberal or reformist feminism
- Radical feminism
- Marxist feminism
- Dual systems feminism
- Difference feminism and poststructuralism

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Know the main types of feminist theories.
- Understand the similarities and differences between feminist theories.
- Be able to evaluate the strengths and limitations of feminist theories.
Liberals are concerned with the human and civil rights and freedoms of the individual. In keeping with the Enlightenment tradition, they believe that all human beings should have equal rights. Since both men and women are human beings, so both should have the same inalienable rights and freedoms. Reformism is the idea that progress towards equal rights can be achieved by gradual reforms or piecemeal changes in society, without the need for revolution. Liberal feminists (sometimes called reformist or 'equal rights’ feminists) believe women can achieve gender equality in this way. For example, they argue that laws and policies against sex discrimination in employment and education can secure equal opportunities for women.

As well as campaigning for changes in the law, liberal feminists call for cultural change. In their view, traditional prejudices and stereotypes about gender differences are a barrier to equality. For example, beliefs that women are less rational and more dominated by emotion and instinct are used to legitimate their exclusion from decision-making roles and their confinement to childrearing and housework. Liberal feminists reject the idea that biological differences make women less competent or rational than men, or that men are biologically less emotional or nurturing than women.

**Sex and gender**

Like Ann Oakley (1972), liberal feminists distinguish between sex and gender:

- **Sex** refers to biological differences between males and females, such as their reproductive role, hormonal and physical differences.
- **Gender** refers to culturally constructed differences between the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles and identities assigned to males and females. Includes the ideas that cultures hold about the abilities of males and females, such as whether they are capable of rationality. These ideas are transmitted to each generation through socialisation.

While sex differences are seen as fixed, gender differences vary between cultures and over time. Thus, what is considered a proper role for women in one society at one time may be disapproved of or forbidden in another. For example, until fairly recently it was rare to see women bus drivers in Britain, but this is now quite common, while in Saudi Arabia women are forbidden to drive any vehicle whatsoever.

For liberal feminists, then, sexist attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about gender are culturally constructed and transmitted through socialisation. Therefore, to achieve gender equality, we must change society’s socialisation patterns. Hence, liberal feminists seek to promote appropriate role models in education and the family — for example, female teachers in traditional male subjects, or fathers taking responsibility for domestic tasks.

Similarly, they challenge gender stereotyping in the media. Over time, they believe, such actions will produce cultural change and gender equality will become the norm. Liberal feminism is an optimistic theory, very much in keeping with the Enlightenment project and its faith in progress. Liberal feminists believe that:

- Changes in socialisation and culture are gradually leading to more rational attitudes to gender and overcoming ignorance and prejudice.
- Political action to introduce anti-discriminatory laws and policies is steadily bringing about progress to a fairer society in which a person’s gender is no longer important.
Similarly, Butler argues that the white, Western, middle-class women who dominate the feminist movement have falsely claimed to represent ‘universal womanhood’. She concludes that feminists are wrong to believe they can adapt the Enlightenment project so that it somehow includes all women — because women are not a single entity who all share the same ‘essence’.

For poststructuralism, there is no fixed essence of what it is to be a woman. Because our identities are constituted through discourses, and because there are many different discourses in different times and cultures, there can be no fixed entity called ‘womanhood’ that is the same everywhere. For example, womanhood in Saudi Arabia is constituted partly by Islamic discourse. By contrast, womanhood in the West is constituted to a greater extent by the discourses of advertising and the media.

Butler argues that poststructuralism offers advantages for feminism. It enables feminists to ‘de-construct’ (analyse) different discourses to reveal how they subordinate women — as in the medicalisation of childbirth, for example. Thus, we can examine the discourses of medicine, sexuality, advertising, art, religion, science, pornography etc. to uncover the power/knowledge by which they define and oppress women. Different discourses give rise to different forms of oppression, and thus to different identities and experiences for women. Likewise, each discourse provokes its own distinct form of resistance and struggle, with its own aims and demands.

In Butler’s view, therefore, by rejecting essentialism and by stressing the diversity of discourses, poststructuralism recognizes and legitimates the diversity of women’s lives and struggles, rather than prioritizing some and excluding others.

**Evaluation of poststructuralist feminism**

While poststructuralist feminism seems to offer a theoretical basis for recognising the diversity of women’s experiences and struggles against oppression, critics argue that it has some weaknesses.

For example, Sylvia Walby (1992) agrees that there are differences among women, but she argues that there are also important similarities — they are all faced with patriarchy. For example, compared with men, women face a greater risk of low pay, domestic violence and sexual assault.

Similarly, celebrating difference may have the effect of dividing women into an infinite number of sub-groups, thereby weakening feminism as a movement for change. Lynne Segal (1999) criticises poststructuralist feminism for abandoning any notion of real, objective social structures. Oppression is not just the result of discourses — how we think and speak about women — it is about real inequality. Feminists should therefore continue to focus on the struggle for equality of wealth and income.
Symbolic interactionism first developed at the University of Chicago in the first half of the 20th century. Like other action theories, it focuses on our ability to create the social world through our actions and interactions, and it sees these interactions as based on the meanings we give to situations. We convey these meanings through symbols, especially language.

G.H. Mead

The work of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) forms the basis for that of many later interactionists.

Symbol versus instincts

Mead observed that, unlike animals, our behaviour is not shaped by fixed, pre-programmed instincts. Instead, we respond to the world by giving meanings to the things that are significant to us. In effect, we create and inhabit a world of meanings. We do this by attaching symbols to the world. A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else.

Unlike animals, therefore, we do not simply respond to a stimulus in an automatic, pre-determined way. Instead, an interpretive phase comes between the stimulus and our response to it — before we know how to respond to the stimulus, we have to interpret its meaning. Once we have done this, we can then choose an appropriate response.

Mead illustrates this with an example. When one dog snarls at another, the snarl acts as a direct stimulus, to which the second dog responds instinctively, automatically adopting a defensive posture. There is no conscious interpretation by the dog of the other’s actions. By contrast, if I shake my fist at you, I am using a symbol — one that has a variety of possible meanings. To understand what is going on, you must interpret the meaning of this symbol. For instance, am I angry, or just joking? You may decide I am angry with you. Only then will you be able to choose how to respond.

Taking the role of the other

But how do we manage to interpret other people’s meanings? In Mead’s view, we do so by taking the role of the other — putting ourselves in the place of the other person and seeing ourselves as they see us. Our ability to take the role of the other develops through social interaction. We first do this as young children: through imitative play when we take on the role of significant others such as parents, and learn to see ourselves as they see us. Later, we come to see ourselves from the point of view of the wider community — the generalised other.

For Mead, to function as members of society, we need the ability to see ourselves as others see us. Through shared symbols, especially language, we become conscious of the ways of acting that others require of us.
Evaluation of postmodernism

Postmodernists make some important points about today’s society, such as the significance of the media for culture and identity. Some also argue that its rejection of all-embracing meta-narratives is valuable. However, postmodernism is widely criticised.

From a Marxist perspective, Philo and Miller (2001) make several criticisms of postmodernism:

- It ignores power and inequality. For example, the idea that media images are unconnected with reality ignores the ruling class’ use of the media as a tool of domination.

- Similarly, the claim that we freely construct our identities through consumption overlooks the effect of poverty in restricting such opportunities.

- Postmodernists are simply wrong to claim that people cannot distinguish between reality and media image.

- By assuming all views are equally true, it becomes just as valid to deny that the Nazis murdered millions as it does to affirm it. This is a morally indefensible position.

Postmodernism can be criticised on logical grounds. For example, Lyotard’s theory is self-defeating: why should we believe a theory that claims that no theory has the truth? Moreover, Best and Kellner (1991) point out that postmodernism is a particularly weak theory: while it identifies some important features of today’s society (such as the importance of the media and consumption), it fails to explain how they came about.

Postmodernists are criticised for their pessimism about the Enlightenment project — their view that objective knowledge is impossible and that nothing can be done to improve society. David Harvey (1989) rejects this pessimistic view. He argues that political decisions do make a real difference to people’s lives and that knowledge can be used to solve human problems. Even if our theories cannot guarantee absolute truth, many sociologists argue that they are at least an approximation to it. As such, they are the best guide we have to improving the world.

While postmodernism has identified some important features of today’s society, it is poorly equipped to explain them. By contrast, recent sociological theories have offered more satisfactory explanations of the changes society is undergoing.
Unlike postmodernism, theories of late modernity argue that the rapid changes we are witnessing are not the dawn of a new, postmodern era. On the contrary, these changes are actually a continuation of modernity itself. However, theories of late modernity do recognise that something important is happening. In their view, key features of modernity that were always present have now become intensified.

For example, social change has always been a feature of modern society, but now the pace of change has gone into overdrive. In other words, we are still within modernity, but we have entered its 'late' phase.

In this view, if we are still in the modern era, then the theories of modernist sociology are still useful. Unlike postmodernism, theories of late modernity do subscribe to the Enlightenment project - they still believe we can discover objective knowledge and use it to improve society.

THEORIES OF LATE MODERNITY

Unlike postmodernism, theories of late modernity argue that the rapid changes we are witnessing are not the dawn of a new, postmodern era. On the contrary, these changes are actually a continuation of modernity itself. However, theories of late modernity do recognise that something important is happening. In their view, key features of modernity that were always present have now become intensified.

For example, social change has always been a feature of modern society, but now the pace of change has gone into overdrive. In other words, we are still within modernity, but we have entered its 'late' phase.

In this view, if we are still in the modern era, then the theories of modernist sociology are still useful. Unlike postmodernism, theories of late modernity do subscribe to the Enlightenment project - they still believe we can discover objective knowledge and use it to improve society.

Giddens: Reflexivity

According to Giddens, we are now at the stage of late or **high modernity**. A defining characteristic of modern society is that it experiences rapid change - often on a global scale. This is because of two key features of modernity: **disembedding** and **reflexivity**.

Giddens defines disembedding as 'the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction. In other words, today we no longer need face-to-face contact in order to interact - disembedding breaks down geographical barriers and makes interaction more impersonal.

Giddens argues that in high modern society, tradition and custom become much less important and no longer serve as a guide to how we should act, and we become more individualistic. For example, sons are no longer expected to follow the same occupation as their fathers but are free to pursue their own individual goals instead.

Because tradition no longer tells us how to act, we are forced to become **reflexive**. That is, we have to constantly monitor, reflect on and modify our actions in the light of information about the possible risks and opportunities that they might involve.

Consequently, reflexivity means that we are all continually re-evaluating our ideas and theories - nothing is fixed or permanent, everything is up for challenge. Under these conditions, culture in late modern society becomes increasingly unstable and subject to change.

Together disembedding and reflexivity account for the rapid and widespread nature of social change in high modernity. In particular by enabling social interaction to spread rapidly across the globe, they help to drive the process of globalisation.
3) ‘Society has now entered a new, postmodern age and we need new theories to understand it’. Assess this view.

(33 marks)

The examiner’s advice

This question carries 15 A01 mark (knowledge and understanding) and 18 A02 marks (interpretation, application, analysis and evaluation). You need to deal with both aspects of this question - first, the claim that we are living in postmodernity, and second, that this calls for new (postmodernist or late modernist) theories. Begin by outlining what has changed about society, focusing on globalisation and its social, economic, technological etc causes, and on changes such as the increased importance of the media.

You need to assess theories that try to understand these changes. Begin with postmodernist criticisms of modernist theories and concepts such as diversity, instability, relativism, simulacra, hyper-reality etc. You should also examine late modernist theories (e.g. Giddens and Beck) and Marxist theories of postmodernity. Focus on the idea that they see today’s society as a development of modern capitalist society, not a break with it, and that we can use our knowledge to change it for the better.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological security</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive modernization</td>
<td>The idea that risk avoidance becomes a major factor in social organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign-objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simulacrum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-space compression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-national companies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-national organised crimes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 under-achievement, 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, commit crime, or fail in school. But it can also include behaviour that society doesn't normally regard as a problem - for example, why people are prosperous or law-abiding, or succeed at school or remain happily married.

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

For example, Georg Simmel (1950) was interested in revealing the universal characteristics present in all social relationships, whether in an office, a family or a bus queue. Similarly, historical studies of, say, the social structure of the Roman Empire may have little relevance to today’s social problems.

On the other hand, of course, many sociologists are interested in solving social problems through their research. For example, sociologists who feel strongly about poverty or about inequalities in educational achievement have conducted research aimed at discovering solutions to these social problems. Similarly, many sociologists are employed directly by government departments such as the Home Office or the Department for Children, Schools and Families. These sociologists often have a direct input into making policies and evaluating their effectiveness, for example in reducing crime or raising pupils’ achievements.
The social democratic perspective 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 extensive research on poverty. On the basis of his findings, he made recommendations for policies such as fairer, higher benefit levels, and more public spending on health, education and welfare services.

Similarly, the Black Report (1989) on class inequalities in health made no fewer than 37 far-reaching policy recommendations for reducing these deep-rooted inequalities. These included free school meals for all children, improved working conditions, better benefits for the disabled 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. The new government refused to implement the report's recommendations on grounds of cost, and even 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 policy-makers 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' (law-makers) 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:

- **They provide ideological legitimation** 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.
The interactionist Jack Douglas (1967) rejects the positivist idea of external social facts determining our behaviour. Individuals have free will and they choose how to act on the basis of meanings. To understand suicide, therefore, we must uncover its meanings for those involved, instead of imposing our own meanings—such as Durkheim's four 'types' of suicide—onto the situation.

Douglas also rejects Durkheim's use of quantitative data from official statistics. These are not objective facts, but simply social constructions resulting from the way coroners label certain deaths as suicides. Instead, Douglas proposes we use qualitative data from case studies of suicides, 'since he believes these can reveal the actors' meanings and give us a better idea of the real rate of suicide than the official statistics.

Like Douglas, J. Maxwell Atkinson (1978) rejects the idea that external social facts determine behaviour, and agrees that statistics are socially constructed. Unlike Douglas, however, Atkinson argues that we can never know the 'real rate' of suicide, even using qualitative methods, since we can never know for sure what meanings the deceased held.

For Atkinson, the only thing we can study about suicide is the way that the living make sense of deaths—the interpretive procedures coroners use to classify deaths. For ethnomethodologists, members of society have a stock of taken-for-granted assumptions with which they make sense of situations—including deaths. The sociologist's role is to uncover what this knowledge is and how coroners use it to arrive at a verdict.
Scientists begin to formulate rival paradigms and this marks the start of a scientific revolution. For Kuhn, rival paradigms are incommensurable - two competing paradigms cannot be judged or measured by the same set of standards to decide which one is 'best'. What supporters of one paradigm regard as a decisive refutation of the other, supporters of the rival paradigm will not even recognise as a valid test, because each paradigm is a totally different way of seeing the world. To move from one to the other requires a massive shift of mind-set.

Eventually, one paradigm does win out and becomes accepted by the scientific community, allowing normal science to resume, but with a new set of basic assumptions, puzzles and so on. However, the process is not a rational one - in fact, Kuhn compares it with a religious conversion. Generally, the new paradigm gains support first of all from younger scientists, partly because they have less to lose than senior colleagues whose reputations have been built on the old one. In fact, as the physicist Max Planck said, the new theory triumphs 'because its opponents eventually die'.

Kuhn's view of the scientific community contrasts sharply with that of Popper. For Popper the scientific community is open, critical and rational, constantly seeking to falsify existing theories by producing evidence against them. Progress occurs by challenging accepted ideas.

For Kuhn, by contrast, the scientific community is not normally characterised by its openness, originality or critical spirit. For most of the time, during periods of normal science, scientists are conformists who unquestioningly accept the key ideas of the paradigm as a basis for making progress. Only during a scientific revolution does this change. Even then, scientists have no rational means of choosing one paradigm rather than another.

**Implications for sociology**

Currently sociology is pre-paradigmatic and therefore pre-scientific, divided into competing perspectives or schools of thought. There is no shared paradigm - no agreement on the fundamentals of what to study, how to study it, what we should expect to find and so on. For example, functionalists disagree with Marxists about basic questions such as whether society is based on consensus or on conflict.

On Kuhn's definition, sociology could only become a science if such basic disagreements were resolved. Whether this is even possible is open to doubt. For example, so long as there are political differences between conservative and radical sociologists, rival perspectives will probably continue to exist in sociology. Even within perspectives, there are often disagreements about key concepts, issues and methods. It is hard to imagine such differences being overcome to create a unified paradigm.

Postmodernists might argue that a paradigm would also not be desirable in sociology. The paradigm sounds suspiciously like a meta-narrative - a dominant and dominating view of what reality is like. Postmodernists object to this both on the grounds that it silences minority views, and that it falsely claims to have special access to the truth.
Sociologists are divided as to whether sociology can be a science. While positivists favour adopting the natural sciences as a model, interpretivists reject the view that sociology can be scientific. This division derives largely from disagreement about the nature of sociology and its subject matter:

### Positivists

See sociology as the study of causes: the facts or structures external to individuals that cause them to behave as they do. In the positivists’ view, this is the same approach as the natural sciences - to discover the cause of the patterns they observe, whether in nature or society.

### Interpretivists

See sociology as the study of meaningful social action: the internal meanings that lead actors to choose their course of action. Human actions are not governed by external causes, unlike events in nature, so they cannot be studied in the same way as natural phenomena.

However, while positivists and interpretivists disagree about whether sociology can be a science, they both accept the positivist model of the natural sciences as described above. Basically, the positivist view sees natural science as inductive reasoning or verificationism applied to the study of observable patterns.

Yet as we have seen, since the positivist view of science as formulated in the 19th century, quite different pictures of science have emerged, and these have very different implications for the question of whether sociology can or should be scientific. For example:

### Popper

Rejects verificationism in favour of falsificationism as the defining feature of science and argues that on this definition, much sociology is unscientific, but that a scientific sociology is possible in principle.

### Kuhn

Sociology can only become a science once all sociologists adopt a single shared paradigm.

### Realists

Science does not only deal in observable phenomena, as positivists argue, but in underlying unobservable structures. On this basis, both Marxism and interpretivism may be seen as scientific.
Debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom

- The relationship between debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom and the debates about the nature of science and of the nature of sociology
- The arguments and evidence for and against the view that sociology can or should be objective
- The arguments and evidence for and against the view that sociology can be value free.

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 subjective values to get in the way of discovering the facts. Every member of society has values - beliefs, opinions and prejudices about right or wrong, good and bad. 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 sociological research be 'value free' - free from contamination or distortion by their values? This question has divided sociologists for well over a century: Some argue that it is both possible and desirable to keep subjective values out of research in the same way as natural scientists are said to do. Only in this way can we 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 sometimes 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.

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
The classical thinkers who shaped sociology in its early years, such as Comte, Durkheim, Marx and Weber all had important 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 tended not to see a 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 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 establish the fact that divorcees are more likely to commit suicide. However, this does not logically 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 three 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.

[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, and this means 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. But we must keep our values out of the process - the hypothesis must stand or fall on whether or not it fits the observed facts.

[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, Albert Einstein's theories in physics helped make the atomic bomb possible; yet subsequently, Einstein voiced his opposition to nuclear weapons.

To summarise, Weber sees values as relevant to the sociologist in choosing what to research, in interpreting the data collected, and as a citizen and member of society 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 gathering the facts.
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) poses the question, 'Whose side are we on?' He argues that values are always present in sociology. Traditionally, however, sociologists (especially positivists and functionalists) have tended to take the viewpoint of the powerful - 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 their behaviour - 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 that interactionists tend to focus on.

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 and the oppressed, as Becker and Goffman do. 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. Sources of funding 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 that it asks - and fails to ask. Thus the sociologist's work is likely to embody the values and interests of their paymasters.

In some cases, funding organisations may prevent publication of the research if its findings prove unacceptable. In the case of the Black Report (1980) into class inequalities in health, the Conservative government arranged for its release over a bank holiday weekend, allegedly in the hope of reducing the publicity it would receive - because the report's findings ran counter to government views. In addition to the influence of those who fund the research, we should also consider the sociologist's own personal values deriving from their background, upbringing and so on. 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 methods 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.