2 THEORY AND METHODS

**2.1 Consensus, Conflict, Structural, Social Action and Interpretivist Theories**

P.110 GETTING YOU THINKING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** Examples might include Darwin’s theory of evolution from biology, Einstein’s theory of relativity, behaviourist theories in psychology or Keynes, theory in economics.

**2.** The idea that humans are basically selfish is based upon assumptions that humans are not particularly social creatures and which deny the interdependence of humans. Such assumptions influence much of classical economics and behaviourist psychology. These assumptions tend to be supported by those who are pro-capitalist and in favour of individual competitions as an organising principle of society.

The idea that humans have to work together to survive is based upon more collectivist assumptions that assumes that cooperation and mutual aid are important. This tends to be supported by more left-wing political philosophies such as communism.

The idea that humans usually live up to the labels that people attached to them is based upon the assumption that humans are affected by their social circumstances rather than having an inner core or essence which is unchangeable. In sociology these assumptions are found in interactionist theories, amongst others.

The idea that all humans are brought up to understand and accept the culture in which they are raised is based upon conservative principles that humans are generally likely to conform and that humans lack individual free-will. These assumptions make it difficult to explain social change.

**3.** The time and place that you live is bound to influence the range of ideas that are available to you and therefore the theories you have about the world and how you believe it works. In societies with a dominant religious worldview it is possible to hold different views but it is much easier to accept religious explanations and understandings. Similarly, in any sort of totalitarian society, including communist and fascist ones, where alternative views are not permitted, it is difficult (although not impossible) to hold contrary views. Levels of technology alongside attitudes to science are also bound to have an effect upon how you see the world. For example, the availability of recent scientific evidence about the origins and nature of the universe provides a very different perspective to the worldviews of traditional religious societies. Individuals do not have to accept any particular worldview and there are always those who reject the dominant ones within their society, that some societies make it much more difficult to have dissenting views either because non-standard beliefs might be discouraged or punished or because alternative belief systems are not available. Purely original thought by individuals may be impossible (because it has to build upon existing understandings) but some differences in view and some novel thinking is always possible.

P.117-118 Focus on SKILLS: HERE’S HOW TO CUT RUSSELL BRAND DOWN TO SIZE

**Suggested answers**

**1.** He means that the actions of the most powerful should not go unpunished. Literally, bankers who helped cause the 2008 financial crash should be sent to prison, the dominance of big media corporations (for example News Corporation) should be undermined and big companies who do not pay sufficient tax should be forced to do so.

**2.** The author, Russell Brand, means that gross inequalities in wealth are much more significant than very small rises in pay that might be offered to the lowest paid as a result of a rise in the minimum wage. The amounts of money involved are relatively trivial and will do nothing to change the very high concentration of wealth amongst the richest in the population.

**3.** There are many similarities between Marx’s views and those of Russell Brand. Both see wealth as being highly concentrated in the hands of the few and that this is wrong. Both also emphasise the harmful effects of inequality and believe that power is concentrated in the hands of a few. Many of those that Brand attacks, such as bankers and rich corporations, can be seen as part of the ruling class in Marxist theory. Many Marxists also believe that mainstream political parties will support the capitalist system and it makes little difference therefore which party you vote for. However, Marx did not put particular emphasis upon the role of young people and he saw the working class as the key to change society rather than the young. Russell Brand’s ideas lack a clear theoretical underpinning whereas Marx’s ideas are supported by an elaborate theoretical model.

**4.** You may come up with different answers to this question. On the one hand you might argue that there are significant differences between the main political parties and that, for example, voting for the Labour Party or for the Green Party as opposed to, for example the Conservative Party would make a significant difference to levels of inequality and opportunities for people from less affluent backgrounds. Equally, you could argue that supposedly left-wing parties have actually done very little to change levels of inequality or to make a fundamental difference to the power of different groups in society. Each argument could be supported by different types of evidence, for example evidence on social mobility, and on income and wealth inequality or comments on actual policies that have been introduced by particular parties.

p.122 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** The ‘organic analogy’ involves comparing human society to human bodies by showing how different parts of societies/bodies perform different functions that benefit the whole society/body.

**2.** An ‘economic determinist’ is a person who argues that the development of society is determined by economic forces and individuals have little or no opportunity to change the way in which society develops or works through their own conscious choices.

**3.** ‘Structuration’ is, according to Giddens, the way in which structure and action can be seen as two sides of the same coin in that structure makes action possible and action helps to reproduce structure.

**4.** The four functional pre-requisites, according to Parsons are, *adaptation* (the need for an economic system to meet the needs of individuals), *goal attainment* (the need for a system of decision-making*), integration* (the need to provide institutions which produce social harmony), and *latency* (the need for individual beliefs and values to provide a common culture and ways of managing tension).

**5.** The theory in question is phenomenology.

**6.** Firstly, Marxism tends to emphasise conflict between classes whereas functionalism emphasises a lack of conflict and does not identify class divisions. Secondly, Marxists attach particular significance to economic factors in shaping society whereas functionalists see the economy as only one of several factors shaping society. Thirdly, Marxist believe that society is dominated by a ruling class whereas functionalist do not believe that there is a ruling class and that everyone has equal opportunities to achieve success and gain power.

**7.** A structural perspective is a top-down approach which tends to argue that the development of society and the behaviour of individuals is largely shaped or at least restricted through the way in which major institutions and social divisions are constituted in a particular society. Social action approaches tend to argue that patterns and regularities in society are created through the actions of individuals and it is possible to change the structures of society through a number of individuals changing their behaviour. While both argue that existing societies shape behaviour, social action perspectives allow for more choice and tend to be less deterministic.

**8.** Symbolic interactionism can be criticised for lacking a plausible theory of power and for underestimating the extent to which human behaviour is limited by social structures.

**9.** Merton argues that conventional functionalism neglects the possibility that some aspects of society may be dysfunctional and that conventional functionalism ignores the possible unintended consequences (or latent functions), which may not be desirable ones, of some aspects of society.

**10.** Marxist perspectives originate from the work of Karl Marx in the 19th century and some sociologists argue that they may not be particularly useful for understanding society in the 21st century. Nevertheless, others believe that the basic principles of Marxism, in particular its analysis of capitalist society, do apply to society today because capitalism is still central to modern society.

Marx argued that each society has a particular mode of production and in capitalist society there is a central division between a ruling class which owns the means of production and the proletariat or working class who do not. According to Marx, the foundation of society is the economic base, which shapes aspects of the superstructure such as religion education and family life. The superstructure is used to produce false class consciousness amongst the working classes, that it is used to persuade them that society is fair and just when, according to Marxists, it is not. In particular, Marxists argue that gross inequalities of wealth leas to equally unequal power relationships in which the interests of the ruling class are systematically favoured at the expense of those other members of society. Marxist believe that the working class are exploited by not being given the full value of their labour and the ruling class become increasingly rich through the accumulation of profits and the concentration of capital in the hands of very few people. Marx did believe that eventually the capitalist system will be undermined through ever greater crises and class consciousness which would ultimately lead to the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by communism. This will be preceded by the gradual polarisation of society between an increasingly wealthy very small minority of the population, and the relatively poor mass of the population.

Many sociologists have questioned aspects of this Marxist theory, for example arguing that class consciousness has not developed, wealth has spread through the middle class rather than classes becoming increasingly polarised, and have also questioned whether aspects of the superstructure, such as education and religion, really favour ruling class interests. It is has also been argued that the state, as part of the superstructure, no longer exclusively supports ruling class interest and many measures have been introduced which benefit the working class (such as welfare payments, free healthcare and education). The other theories discussed in this chapter also have little time for Marxist ideas. For example, functionalist often argue the opposite of Marxists claiming that society functions not to benefit the ruling class but to benefit members of society as a whole. They emphasise that there is consensus in society rather than conflict and class division and believe that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed through a meritocratic education system. There is ample evidence, however, to show that equality of opportunity is a myth (for example see the education chapter) and there are numerous examples of conflict within society related to class and other social divisions.

Feminist critics of Marxism and those who point to racism and inequality between ethnic groups are on stronger ground than functionalists in arguing that conflict is not confined to class inequality and can be based upon other social divisions (such as gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality). Social action theories question the Marxist emphasis upon structure claiming that Marxism is too deterministic and fails to take account of the micro processes that produce and reproduce differences and inequalities within society. Interactionists, for example, place far more emphasis upon small-scale interaction and how this shapes opportunity in society rather than claiming that most of what happens in social worlds is shaped by social structure.

To some extent neo-Marxists have taken account of these criticisms. For example, Antonio Gramsci places less emphasis on the economy and is less deterministic than Marx was originally, Althusser argues that the state has relative autonomy from control by the ruling class and the Frankfurt School follow social action approaches in placing more emphasis upon the motivation of individuals. In general, all these approaches have shifted away from structural and deterministic Marxism towards one which seems better able to account for the variety of social processes in contemporary societies.

Neo-Marxists have succeeded in modifying Marxism to make it more flexible able to accommodate aspects of the contemporary world. Supporters of Marxism would argue that nevertheless a fundamental division between the ruling class and the working class remains and indeed wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of an ever smaller an increasingly powerful group of people. But there is ample evidence that other social divisions are important as well as social class and many of the conflicts in the world today are based more around religion and nationalism and other non-class identities than on class differences. There is little evidence of a class conscious working class developing and capitalism being overthrown with a communist alternative, indeed the reverse is true with the collapse of communism in most countries and a near global dominance of the capitalist system. However, it can be argued that the dominance of capitalism itself makes Marxist analysis of the limitations and problems associated with capitalism more relevant than ever.

**2.2 feminism**

P.129-130 Focus on skills: *RECLAIMing MEANING THE F WORD* (2010)

**1.** The concept ‘glass ceiling’ refers to the almost invisible barriers which prevent women from rising to the highest positions in organisations and occupations.

**2.** Another way in which popular culture might be seen as sexist is in the portrayal of women in films with most lead roles being taken by men and most women being in secondary roles. In addition, men are usually portrayed in the action roles with women often playing the ‘love interest’ for male heroes.

**3.** Redfern and Aune have much in common with other feminists. Most feminists would agree with their ideas in terms of ‘liberated bodies’ and with their views on ‘sexual freedom and choice’. Their discussion of violence echoes radical feminist views although other types of feminists would also be opposed to this type of violence against women. Their discussion of ‘Equality at work and home’ particularly reflects socialist feminist views but again other feminists would agree with these points. Liberal feminists, like Redfern and Aune, put particular emphasis on the underrepresentation of women in politics (and also religion) while liberal feminists and some radical feminists emphasise sexism in popular culture.

Redfern and Aune’s views therefore overlap to some extent with all feminist positions but because they do not give primacy to material factors they probably cannot be characterised as Marxist or socialist feminists. Redfern and Aune do not put forward a programme for the complete transformation of society, advocate separate development for females or suggest female supremacy. It is problematic therefore to characterise them as radical feminists. They are probably best characterised as liberal feminists who believe in the reform of all aspects of society in order to tackle patriarchy. However, their demands are probably more wide-ranging and robust than those of many liberal feminists so they adopt a position which is not too far away from that of most radical feminists.

**4.** According to this source many women are unwilling to describe themselves as feminists because it has ‘negative connotations’. Examples of this might be the idea that feminists ‘hate men’ or that women are only feminist because they are not attractive to men. Furthermore, feminism is sometimes seen as being an extreme position rather than a mainstream position for women to support.

**5.** Marxist feminist might criticise them for failing to advocate a major redistribution of wealth from men to women while radical feminists might criticise them for failing to argue that a radical transformation of society’s structure as well as its culture is necessary to end patriarchy.

P.133 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**1.** ‘Patriarchy’ ‘refers to a social structure which ensures and maintains male dominance.

**2.** ‘Jouissance’ refers to female feelings of physical pleasure which are partly sexual but can also be related to parts of the body which are not normally associated with sexual feelings.

**3.** ‘Second-wave feminism’ is a period feminism that started in the 1960s and continued in the 1970s which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and which was strongly associated with the term Women’s Liberation.

**4.** Firstly, liberal feminism is not based on a distinct theoretical perspective but is grounded in campaigns for equal opportunity between the sexes. Secondly, it accepts that women have made significant progress in gaining rights already (while believing that there is much further to go). Thirdly liberal feminists believe that greater equality can be achieved through gradual reform rather than very radical or revolutionary change.

**5.** Radical feminism believes that a complete transformation of society is needed to liberate women.

**6.** Marxists/socialist feminists believe that gender inequality largely results from inequalities in wealth and income whereas post-modern feminists do not believe this. Postmodern feminists emphasise a plurality of differences between particular groups of women and individual women whereas Marxist/socialist feminists do not emphasise this and only acknowledge differences between women from different social classes.

**7.** Butler believes that there are no natural or innate differences between the sexes. Therefore to take on the characteristics of a male or female gender in a particular society it is necessary to practice carrying out the different roles so that through repetition these roles come to be seen as natural or become embodied in the physical characteristics and muscle memory of individuals.

**8.** Black feminism can be criticised for emphasising race and ethnic divisions between women to the exclusion of other division such as class, sexuality and age. They can also be criticised for suggesting that only women from certain ethnic groups can fully understand the nature of oppression whereas this may be possible without the experience of racism as well as sexism.

**9.** Feminism has made a positive contribution to sociology by helping to develop a distinctive feminist methodology which challenges some ‘malestream’ assumptions about scientific objectivity. For example, it emphasises how empathy is required before valid data can be produced in interviews. Secondly, it has introduced important new topics into sociology which were previously neglected by predominantly male sociologists. These include domestic labour, conjugal roles and childbirth.

**10.** Unsurprisingly, all feminist believe that feminism is still essential in contemporary Britain. However, they disagree over exactly what form feminism should take and to some extent why it is still needed. At each stage in its development through first, second and third wave feminism, feminists have had to argue against a predominant view that equality or women’s rights are neither necessary nor appropriate. Since the third wave feminism started developing in the 1990s, many non-feminists have argued that feminism is no longer necessary because women have already achieved many of the rights demanded by previous generations. These include the right to vote, the right to equal pay, protection from sex discrimination, maternity leave and so on. However, a variety of feminists argue that whatever the apparent formal legal rights of women, in practice women are still disadvantaged or even oppressed in contemporary society. For example, they are still much more likely to suffer from low pay, poverty, sexual violence and negative stereotyping than men, and they are less represented than men in the highest paid and most prestigious and powerful jobs in society. In recent years, feminists have explored more subtle aspects of discrimination, disadvantage and oppression as well, for example looking at the representation of women in popular culture and the use of language.

Feminists such as Redfern and Aune argued that the word ‘feminism’ has taken on negative connotations being associated with strident and unfeminine beliefs and unreasonable demands. It is largely for these reasons, according to them, that feminism has fallen into disrepute and not because there is any lack of gender inequality in society. They point to several reasons why feminism is still important. These include the needs to improve women’s health, particularly in the global South and the need to challenge ideals of feminine beauty; the needs to move beyond sexual double standards which criticise female promiscuity but applaud male promiscuity; the need to end sexual and physical violence against women, the needs to challenge the shortage of women in top positions and the continuing glass ceiling; the need to transform the underrepresentation of women in politics, the needs to eradicate sexism in popular culture including music and the needs to ensure that feminism is no longer regarded as a negative term.

Different types of feminists all agree that feminism is still required although there understanding of why it is required is rather different. Radical feminists believe that society continues to be fundamentally patriarchal. For example, Millet believes that men continue to use rape and sexual violence to enforce male power and patriarchal ideology and psychology needs to be challenged. Marxists and socialist feminists place much more emphasis upon material inequality both in the workplace and in terms of domestic labour. For example, Sharon Smith suggests that capitalists should pay the full costs of raising children who become part of the workforce and this should not be simply down to the free labour provided by women. Liberal feminists believe that cultural ideas about gender roles remain limiting for men and women alike and that significant strides need to be taken still in terms of non-sexist socialisation of children. Black feminists discuss the multiple sources of oppression suffered by Black women. Post-modern feminists don’t accept the idea that there is a single path to female liberation and believe that different women tend to have different interests. Nevertheless, they argue that sexist and patriarchal language needs to be deconstructed and challenged so that the built-in patriarchal bias in the way people think and talk about the world is eradicated.

In many ways these different views simply add to the cumulative understanding of the multiple, and often subtle ways, in which women continue to be oppressed and disadvantage and also to highlight some of the ways in which the expectations around masculinity limit men’s lives as well. Sociologists such as Sylvia Walby suggests several ways in which feminism is still vital for challenging patriarchal beliefs and patriarchal structures while Judith Butler demonstrates how it is still vital for analysing and questioning the way in which males and females are still expected to conform to roles associated with masculinity and femininity. Clearly feminism needs to take account of some positive changes which have taken place in the opportunities for women in some societies but there is still plenty work for it to do in analysing and challenging patriarchy, sexism and unequal opportunities both in the Global South and in richer parts of the world.

**2.3 LATE-MODERN AND POSTMODERN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES**

P140 Focus on skills: IT’S NOT A WASTE OF TIME TO MAKE A LIVING FROM THE THROWAWAY SOCIETY

**1.** The waste of non-standard food could be seen as a product of rational or modern society because of the desire in such societies to standardise products in order to create predictability, guarantee standards for consumers, minimise complaints and maximise profits. Standardised products allow simple pricing and therefore easy calculation of the profits likely to be made on the sale of particular products. It makes storage and packaging more straightforward. For the consumer wishing to live efficient lives in the face of the demands of family life and work, it is easier to buy standardised products than to select from amongst products of different standards. It also facilitates online shopping where customers cannot see the products before they purchase them, which reduces costs for companies and saves time for consumers.

**2.** This could be seen as a typical feature of postmodern society because the purchase of distinctive niche products can be used to project a particular lifestyle, demonstrate good taste and suggest affiliation to discerning ‘foodie’ social groups. Designer chutneys and other luxury foods show that the individual is up-to-date with trends in food consumption and is able and willing to make personal choices in the selection of food rather than buying the mass-market products available in most supermarkets.

**3.** Consumer culture in postmodern societies involves frequent changes in individual consumer tastes so people can demonstrate familiarity with the latest trends. It also involves a constant quest for novelty and the replacement of old goods with new even if the former remains fit for purpose and is not worn out. Although this might apply mainly to other consumer goods such as clothes and furniture, the same principles may be increasingly applied to food with consumers unwilling to settle for anything other than fresh and good-looking food. Postmodern consumer society involves consumers trying to establish their identity through the goods they consume and they may not wish to be associated with food which is slightly out of date or less than completely fresh.

**4.** The idea that class has declined or even disappeared seems to be contradicted by objective inequalities in the capacity of different groups in society to consume. While some are able to shop at luxury shops such as Fortnum and Mason or buy organic and wholefood, others are unable to buy even basic food with their income and need to turn to food banks. Not everyone is able to take a full part in consumer society with some struggling to buy the necessities and even then top up their purchases with free food from food banks. Clearly, class inequality has not disappeared even if people do not identify with a particular social class as strongly as they did in the past.

P.142 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**1.** ‘Modernity’ is an era in the development of societies in which modern ways of thinking based upon the Enlightenment were/are dominant. Modern ways of thinking are based upon scientific rationality, secularisation and bureaucratisation so that societies are run on the basis of the efficient achievement of set goals.

**2.** A ‘simulacrum’ is a sign which represents an underlying reality which does not exist, for example one representing a mythical or fictional world.

**3.** A ‘metanarrative’ is a general theory which claims to explain many aspects of the way that the world works and also suggests what are the best or correct ways of acting.

**4.** The three main elements of Beck’s theory are:

* The idea of ‘risk society’ which suggests that dangers affects all social groups and higher social classes cannot isolate themselves from them by virtue of their wealth and income. These hazards are largely produced by humans rather than coming from the natural world.
* ‘Reflexive modernisation’ refers to the idea that in a changing society (and in people’s everyday lives) people increasingly question everything and take little for granted. Rather than having fixed views they can reflect upon experience in order to constantly revise their judgements about what should happen in the future’.
* ‘Individualisation’ involves a move away from acceptance of traditional ways of living and a move towards individual choice about identity and lifestyle.

**5.** The theory of David Harvey suggests that postmodernity can be understood through a neo-Marxist perspective.

**6.** The idea of late-modernity suggests that the modern era has not come to an end but rather there has been an intensification and further development of the basic principles of the modern era: whereas the idea of postmodernism suggest that there has been a radical break with modernity and many of the principles of modernity have been reversed.

Another difference is that the idea of late-modernity still tends to see social class as being important whereas the idea of postmodernity suggest that it has affluence and taste.

**7.** Weber believed that modernity involves increasing rationalisation so that there is greater planning of social life based on scientific principles. He also argued that traditional and religious beliefs would decline in significance and the organisation of society would no longer be based upon religion (although individuals might continue to have religious beliefs). Scientific rationality would be put to work in large bureaucratic organisations based upon hierarchical principles. Bureaucracies will be set up to try and achieve specified goals in the most efficient manner.

**8.** Lyotard can be criticised for assuming that all grand plans or ‘metanarratives’ have been abandoned. For example, many people still believe in socialist/Marxist ideas for improving society, as they do in major world religions such as Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, he can be criticised for providing little or no evidence about his claims which can be seen as representing the sort of grand metanarrative he believes has disappeared.

**9.** One weakness of the idea of ‘risk society’ is the idea that the rich cannot insulate themselves from danger. Although it might be impossible to do this completely, they can minimise the risks of many dangers, for example by buying property and living in places with a relatively benign environment away from industrial pollution. Another weakness is his claim that responses to risks are largely individual when many risks can only be tackled through collective efforts to solve them, for example efforts by states and international organisations to counteract or limit global warming.

**10.** Supporters of postmodern views of society certainly argue that modern approaches to sociology, such as functionalism, Marxism most forms of feminism, interactionism and even ideas related to late-modernity are of little use. However, many sociologists would dispute this; some deny that we have entered postmodernity and others would argue that even if we have, previous sociological theories are still very useful.

Lyotard claims that modern theories are outdated because people no longer accept metanarrative such as Marxism. They claim that people have developed ‘incredulity’ toward such theories because they recognise that attempts to impose a fixed set of ideas on society only lead to totalitarianism and disaster. This was evident in the communism in the USSR when led by Stalin and under fascism in Germany led by Hitler. According to Lyotard the search for universal truth has been abandoned in favour of ‘technical language games’ which are more about the search for useful and pragmatic knowledge rather than absolute truth. If this is the case, then grand sociological theories are no longer relevant and should be abandoned. Another very influential theorist of postmodernity is Baudrillard and he too argues that modern theories are outdated and of little contemporary use. He claims that there has been a death of the social as a result of becoming a media-saturated society in which people increasingly act to reflect the media images that they are exposed to. Previous organising principles of society, such as social class, are no longer relevant in a consumer dominated society in which people are more concerned with the meaning of signs (such as consumer brands) than other aspects of their lives. Since many of these signs are simulacra (signs which refer to no underlying reality) it is pointless to analyse institutions like the family, education and the economy in a society consisting of free-floating signs in a world of hyperreality based purely on image. Furthermore, he claims that people no longer have any power to influence anything.

Rather more specifically Crook Pakulski and Waters argue that postmodernisation has led to hyperdifferentiation producing an amazing variety of cultures and cultural products. This involves the breakdown of distinctions reflecting previous social division such as the division between high and low culture and between social classes. Even identities such as those based on ethnicity, gender and age are becoming much less important than they used to be and instead consumerism is the dominant force in society and the basis on which people form identities.

Undoubtedly theories of postmodernity have identified a number of important trends and changes in contemporary societies but it is much more questionable whether they have superseded all modern theories of society. They tend to make very sweeping generalisations about social change and many of the theories, particularly Lyotard and Baudrillard, have used little research to back up their claims. The continuing existence of major inequalities, and the exercise of power (either through the use of wealth or military might) suggest that societies continue to be shaped by real underlying processes and have not become based upon free-floating images and signs. Greg Philo and David Miller suggest that theories of postmodernity ignore the very real effects of inequality, injustice and war and exaggerate the significance of the media. Haralambos and Holborn point out that theories of postmodernity tends to ignore the role of the capitalist economy and inequalities amongst consumers in shaping consumer society. Certainly many sociologists would deny that the social divisions characteristic of modernity have disappeared. Ethnic identities remain very important as is evident in tensions and conflicts in many parts of the world (for example Syria and Iraq) and there is plenty of evidence that class is far from dead. Feminists continue to record the inequalities and injustices stemming from gender differences and in many parts of the world non-heterosexuals still suffer from disadvantage and discrimination.

Furthermore, it is perfectly possible to argue that significant changes have taken place but these can best be understood within a typically modern theoretical analysis. A case in point is the work of David Harvey who develops a neo-Marxist interpretation of postmodernity arguing that the move towards image and the fragmentation of society is largely a product of the developments in capitalism. According to Harvey, since 1970s capitalists have developed new ways of maximising their profits through flexible accumulation which leads to rapid changes in products and the manipulation of identity through areas of consumption such as fashion, holidays and music. He accepts there has been some reduction in the power of national governments but this is largely because transnational capitalist enterprises have gained more power. While he is prepared to accept that there has been some reduction in the significance of class, other social divisions have, according to Harvey, become more important.

To conclude, it can be argued that many of the changes identified by postmodernists are very important and do need to be discussed and analysed by sociologists, but this does not mean that they are incapable of being analysed within the broad framework of modern sociological approaches. These approaches put much more emphasis upon the provision of supporting evidence than most postmodern theories and as such are more credible.

**2.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES AND RESEARCH METHODS**

p.151 Focus on SKILLS: CONNECTING THEORY AND RESEARCH METHODS

**1.** He means that the description is simplistic because it only describes the typical approach adopted by sociologists with different approaches and there is a much greater variety of methods and attitudes to methods than these descriptions suggest. For example, there are different views of what is meant by science and there are significant variations amongst between those who either use broadly quantitative or broadly qualitative approaches.

**2.** Rosenthal and Jacobsen’s method is described as ‘positivistic’ because it adopts a broadly scientific approach to testing theories based upon observation and the control of variables. In these experiments statistics were gathered to try to establish correlations and causal relationships in line with a positivist approach. However, positivism is not usually associated with experiments nor with looking at the effects of labelling so the approach is not described as a straightforward positivist one but rather as one has been influence by aspects of positivism (i.e. positivistic).

**3.** Sociologist might use methods which don’t obviously fit their theoretical approach because practical factors prevent them from using the research method that they would ideally prefer, for example if the people being studied will be unwilling to participate in a study using the preferred method. They may also have to use a method which does not fit their preferred theoretical approach because of ethical reasons, for example it may be unethical to carry out an experiment or to carry out covert participant observation.

**4.** This sort of description fails to take account of the individual variations between sociologists who are generally supportive of a particular theory or perspective. For example, while Durkheim used positivist methods in his study of suicide many other functionalists have used different methods. Parsons largely relied upon abstract reasoning and George Peter Murdock in his study of the family used case studies rather than statistical data. Similarly, some interpretivist sociologists do use statistics to support their overall argument. For example, the phenomenologist Cicourel use statistical data in his study of juvenile justice into Californian cities (see page 17). As discussed above, practical or ethical reasons may prevent sociologist from using their favoured method. Furthermore, many sociologists do not follow a single perspective in a straightforward manner and combine a range of theories in their work. Some sociologists advocate the triangulation of different types of method and others simply use the method which best suits the type of data they are trying to collect in a particular research project.

p152 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**1.** ‘Praxis’ is action designed to change the social world and sometimes social research can be designed as a form of praxis.

**2.** ‘Standpoint epistemology’ is a theory of knowledge which suggests the best knowledge can be gained from the perspective of individuals who have experience of a particular situation.

**3.** ‘Integration in Durkheim’s work refers to the extent to which individuals are involved in and feel a part of social groups.

**4.** Sociologists might use methods that are not usually associated with their theoretical approach because:

* It might be unethical to do so for example if using the method would require lying to people or could result in some harm to them.
* If it is impractical to do so, for example if it will be impossible to gain access to the group to use the method in question.
* If the researcher wishes to check the data through triangulation and therefore would need to adopt more than one method in their study.

**5.** A relativist methodology discussed in the chapter is the postmodern methodology of Steven Tyler.

**6.** Positivist ‘methodology is based on maintaining a social and emotional distance between the researcher and the subjects of the research, whereas feminist methodology is based upon developing a close relationship between researchers and those they are studying.

Positivist methodology is based on the view that researchers should not try to change the social world in the course of a study, whereas feminist methodology is based upon the principle that it is ethical for researchers to intervene and try to improve the situation of the oppressed.

**7.** Atkinson decided to study coroners’ courts to understand suicide because he believed that the definition of a death as suicide is a social construction and there is no objective way of determining whether an individual intended to take their own life or not. Therefore, studying coroners’ courts allows the researcher to understand the processes involved in constructing a death as a suicide or as something else. Without any ‘factual’ data on the incidence of suicides this is all that Atkinson believes that suicide researchers can determine about the nature of suicide in line with his phenomenological approach.

**8.** Interpretivisits argue that positivist methodology is unable to study the internal meanings and motives of individuals which are crucial to understanding their social behaviour. Phenomenologists criticise positivists for assuming that statistics are social facts whereas, they claim, in reality they are social constructs.

**9.** One example of research by critical social scientists is Ann Oakley’s research on housewives and mothers. Another example is Paul Willis’s research on working class boys in the education system. Any research conducted by Marxists, feminists and sociologist from other critical perspectives would be valid answers to this question.

**10.** Several sociologists have argued that only one method is appropriate for studying suicide although they disagree over what the method should be. A well-known exponent of this view was Emile Durkheim who argued that only positivist methods were appropriate, however Maxwell Atkinson argued to the contrary that suicide can only be studied using phenomenological methods. Jack Douglas provided in a different point of view claiming that interpretivist methods were necessary to study suicide. Each of these views was based upon a particular understanding of the nature of the social world and the methodology that was appropriate to study it given the assumptions underlying each theory. However, a number of recent sociologists question whether a single method is appropriate because they adopt more complex view of social reality.

Durkheim claimed that a positivist method was appropriate because he saw suicide statistics as social facts. He argued that a careful analysis of the statistics made it possible to uncover the structural conditions in society which led to an increase or decrease in suicide rates and it makes it possible to explain variations in suicide rates between social groups. Based upon the statistics he identified correlations, analysed causal relationships and even claimed to discover laws of human behaviour. Durkheim found that there were regular patterns in suicide statistics with some social groups, for example Protestants, the highly educated, the childless and the unmarried having much higher rates of suicide than Catholics, the less well educated those with children and those who were married. On this basis he argued that rates of suicide were determined by integration and regulation in society, with both excessive and insufficient regulation and integration being responsible for high suicide rates. Egoistic suicide was caused by insufficient integration amongst individuals who were relatively uninvolved in other social groups, whereas altruistic suicide was caused by excessive integration where people kill themselves for the benefit of others in their social group. Anomic suicide resulted from too little regulation in situations of normlessness such as economic booms and slumps and during revolutions, whereas fatalistic suicide resulted from excessive regulation, for example in the case of the suicide of slaves.

A number of problems with Durkheim’s theory include the questionable assumptions that all suicide rates are valid and reliable measures of the number of people taking their own lives and the belief that suicide can be explained without reference to the individual motives of those who kill themselves.

This latter point is taken up by Jack Douglas he claims that an explanation of suicide can only be undertaken once an understanding of the meaning of suicide has been established. According to Douglas, the meaning of suicide varies considerably between different societies as well as between individuals. For example, in Inuit society elderly Eskimos would sacrifice themselves during times of food shortage, but in other societies suicide might have a religious meaning being seen as a way of getting to heaven. Although the acts might be identical, the context gave completely different meanings to the acts and the explanations for these acts would also have to be quite different. Positivist do not examine the underlying meanings of individual suicide acts and therefore to Douglas only interpretivist methods such as the analysis of qualitative documents would be adequate for understanding suicide.

Maxwell Atkinson also suggest that suicide can only be studied using qualitative methods, but for different reasons. From a phenomenological viewpoint he claims that statistics on suicide are a social construction that result from social processes within coroners’ courts. In this setting, coroners essentially use common-sense notions of whether someone is likely to have killed themselves in reaching their decision. In reality, it is impossible to be sure whether death is the result of somebody unintentionally taking their own life or not. A variety of factors influence coroners including a history of depression, previous suicide attempts, suicide notes and the manner in which a person dies. These factors influence whether an act is recorded as a suicide or not and consequently help to shape the statistics. Positivist, according to Atkinson, simply uncover the assumptions of coroners in the statistics rather than uncovering the actual reasons for suicide. In these circumstances, studying suicide using official statistics does not reveal causes at all and researcher should stick to qualitative analysis of the process through which certain acts are classified as suicide and others are not.

These contrasting views are apparently incompatible but some sociologists argue that different methods can be used effectively to understand different aspects of the sociology of suicide, and it is better to use them together and adopt methodological pluralism rather than to stick to one type of methodology. For example, Jonathan Scourfield et al. use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative evidence in their study of suicide. They accept that suicide verdicts may not be entirely reliable but nevertheless believe that as long as sociologists examine coroners’ verdicts and the statistics based on them critically, they can produce reasonably accurate evidence about who has committed suicide. This in turn can be used to understand the underlying structural causes of suicide in a similar way to that used by Durkheim. In their own research, Scourfield et al. examined 100 case files, identified the cases which were very clearly suicides, then looked at the qualitative evidence suggesting what the motives for suicide might be.

It is reasonable to claim that this approach is superior to the approaches adopted by positivist, interpretivist and phenomenologists because it facilitates an understanding both of the causes of suicide and patterns of suicide while recognising the imperfections in the existing statistics. Of course, in the end, it is a matter of judgement whether death was the result of a deliberate suicide but then no data about the social world is perfect and is always open to interpretation and being contested. However, the most useful sociology is about producing the most reliable and most valid knowledge (rather than expecting it to be infallible) and to achieve this, it is often useful to combine a range of different methods rather than to rely upon a single method.

**2.5 SOCIOLOGY AND SCIENCE**

P.160 FOCUS ON SKILLS: *LANCET* JOURNAL RETRACTS ANDREW WAKEFIELD MMR SCARE PAPER

**Suggested answers**

**1.** The researchers might have been influenced by parents who were suspicious of the MMR vaccine and claimed that it had led to bowel disease or autism in their children. Since the vaccine and diagnosis of these medical problems occur around the same time, parents may have assumed that the two were connected. More generally, scepticism towards medical knowledge and medical treatment and a widespread belief in alternative therapies may have led to a general suspicion of a medical intervention such as vaccination. This could be seen as being linked more broadly to social and cultural developments associated with postmodernity which can lead to anti-scientific sentiments.

**2.** The S&TS approach argues that scientific ‘facts’ are constructed through networks of machines and scientists designed specifically for the purpose of finding certain things. In this case it appears that Andrew Wakefield went looking for evidence of a connection between the vaccine and autism and bowel disease in order to prove that there was a link rather than to objectively test and potentially disapprove the claims that they were linked.

**3.** According to Popper, a scientific approach involves making precise predictions which can be falsified. In this case the details of the research carried out by Wakefield and his colleagues were detailed enough for other researchers to re-test their findings and demonstrate that they were not well-founded and were wrong. Therefore, Popper would see this as an example of science working well even though the initial findings were proved wrong, because they were amenable to falsification.

**4.** According to realists, in an open system there are a wide variety of variables which interact in determining outcomes. In this case, a very large number of social, environmental, genetic and other medical factors could determine whether an individual child develops autism or bowel disease. It is difficult to identify and impossible to control all these variables in scientific research and unethical to carry out experiments. For these reasons, scientists have to be cautious about identifying causal links between particular factors and illness and mindful of the possibility they have failed to take account of important variables. Nevertheless, that does not mean that credible knowledge cannot be produced and false explanations rejected once sufficient evidence is produced based upon rigorous methods.

**5.** Because these researchers receive payment from the Legal Aid Board on behalf of parents seeking redress for what they believed to be harm caused by medical intervention to their children, they have a strong incentive to find evidence to support the parents’ claims. While it is still possible for scientists to be objective in these circumstances if they have very high personal ethical standards, even if they are this may cause scepticism amongst members of the public and the scientific community about whether the findings can be trusted. Similar problems arose when tobacco companies financed research into the effects of smoking and in general it is preferable that scientists carrying out research have no financial interest in a particular outcome. In this case Wakefield and colleagues could have had an interest in finding a connection in order to attract further research grants for investigating the issue.

P.161 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** An ‘open system’ is a set of relationships, for example in the physical or social world, in which there are an unlimited or at least very large number of variables which can affect events. It is therefore impossible to set up an experiment to test the independent effects of each variable and you can never be certain that all variables have been taken into account. In some cases, the interaction between different variables are so complex that there is very limited potential for controlling variables.

**2.** A ‘paradigm’ is a complete theoretical approach to an area of study that provides a self-contained framework for understanding and researching the issues involved. It provides researchers with assumptions about the basic nature of the phenomena and which therefore direct the way in which research is done. Research is designed simply to refine the theoretical approach or paradigms rather than to test whether it is true.

**3.** ‘Falsification’ is the process of testing a theory or claim to try to prove it wrong.

**4.** Science can be regarded as socially constructed because:

* Social factors may influence the kind of research that gets done.
* Social factors may influence the interpretations of scientific question.
* Scientists may be motivated by their own self-interest, for example in terms of furthering their careers, and not just by a desire to find scientific truth.

**5.** Positivism suggest that only observable phenomena should be studied by scientists.

**6.** Popper believes that only theories that can be falsified should be regarded as scientific whereas realists believe that many scientific phenomena are too complex to be able to make precise predictions which can be falsified.

Popper believes that established scientific knowledge consists of theories which have not yet been proved wrong (although they might be in the future) whereas realists believe that established scientific knowledge consists of the best current interpretations of the evidence and they may be refined in the future to match reality better.

**7.** Science and Technology Studies challenges conventional views of science because it adopts ‘the principle of symmetry’ which suggest that all social processes should be understood and explained in the same way. Therefore, explaining how and why certain scientific knowledge is produced is no different to explaining any other aspects of social life and it shouldn’t be assumed that science can exist in a separate sphere where social influences are unimportant and which is totally objective. From this point of view, scientists are involved in the form of work producing a version of reality and the process of producing that reality can be studied by sociologist just the same as any other type of work.

**8.** Positivist theories can be criticised for failing to accept that scientific knowledge may be disproved or falsified in the future and for assuming that scientific knowledge can be objective and uninfluenced by the society in which the knowledge is produced and consumed.

**9.** One example of a scientific revolution was the replacement of Newton’s versions of physics with Einstein’s version of physics involving the acceptance of the theory of relativity. Another example is Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift which replaced the idea that the earth’s crust was fixed.

**10** Whether it is desirable for sociology to be scientific depends partly upon how you view science. Some sociologists do see it as desirable, partly because they believe that science produces the most objective knowledge and also perhaps because scientific subjects have particularly high status. Others, however, question whether it is possible for sociology to be scientific or believe that social life is so fundamentally different to natural phenomena that it is very undesirable to try to use a scientific approach in sociology.

The most straightforward view is put forward by positivists who believe that sociology must adopt exactly the same methodology as natural sciences. However, this is based upon a particular interpretation of scientific knowledge which sees it as based upon an inductive approach in which theories are derived from the careful observation of objective facts. In this process things which can be directly observed are measured or counted, correlations are established and causal relationships determined. Sometimes it may be possible to produce laws. Durkheim exemplified this approach in his study of suicide.

There are several problems with the positivist approach. Karl Popper suggest that it misrepresents the true nature of science which he sees as being based on a deductive approach in which theories should be precise in order that it is possible to falsify them. According to Popper, scientific knowledge is never established for all time and may be falsified at some point in the future. From this point of view, it is desirable for sociology to be scientific but only if it makes precise predictions which can clearly be shown to be wrong in future research.

However, many sociologists argue that this sort of approach is not appropriate in sociology because humans, unlike objects in the natural world, do not respond predictably to particular sets of circumstances. Predictions made at a particular time and place are very unlikely to be repeatedly proved right because social worlds constantly change. If this view is correct then scientific approach may be inappropriate for social sciences such as sociology. Furthermore, interpretive sociologists argue that it is not desirable for sociology to be scientific. From their point of view, understanding the social world cannot be reduced to either observation or prediction. Many of the processes that shape human social life take place in human consciousness which cannot be objectively measured directly observed. To phenomenology, all knowledge is, in any case a product of the classification systems used by humans and social life can therefore only be studied through a process of interpretation rather than through observation, measurement and prediction.

The view that it is undesirable for sociology to the scientific, is echoed by many post-modernists. For example, Rorty argues that scientific knowledge is incomplete and imperfect and there are many questions that it cannot answer. Lyotard believes that science is just another metanarrative and therefore should not be regarded as being more ‘true’ than any other metanarrative (including religion or political ideologies). To Lyotard, science is just a language game and to advocates of Science and Technology Studies science is strongly influenced by the social context in which it is produced. Latour and Woolgar claim on the basis of an observational study of a laboratory, that science simply constructs a particular picture of reality and one that should be given no special status.

If science has no claim to be a superior form of knowledge to any other form, then it does not seem particularly desirable that sociology should claim scientific status. This view is further developed by Thomas Kuhn who argues that science is based upon the acceptance of a particular paradigm over an extended period of time, until this paradigm is replaced by another one as the result of a scientific revolution. When scientists work within one paradigm, they tend to interpret all the evidence in terms of that paradigm and it is very difficult for them to recognise and accept any limitations of the approach. Sociology does not closely fit the model of science put forward by Kuhn because no one theory is accepted as a particular time. Theories such as Marxism, feminism, interactionism and postmodernism are all influential in contemporary sociology. Furthermore, it could be argued that is not desirable for sociology to become scientific by adopting ingle paradigm, because this will lead to the loss of the insights provided by different theoretical approaches. It also seems somewhat implausible that a single theory or paradigms could account for the whole of the social world in all its complexity.

Most of the arguments above, then, seem to suggest that it either impossible or undesirable for sociology to be scientific. However, advocates of realist views of science believe that it *is* both possible and it is desirable for sociology to be a scientific subject. They are able to argue this because they have a rather different view of science that put forward by positivists, Kuhn or Popper. From the viewpoint of realists such as Andrew Sayer, science is not necessarily based upon direct observation or prediction and falsification. Sometimes prediction and falsification are possible when it is operating in what realists call ‘closed systems’, that is, sets of relationships where there are a limited number of variables. In reality, in many situations science has to deal with ‘open systems’ in which there are a very large number of different variables which interact with one another. Thus, for example, when studying the weather or seismology, scientists cannot make precise predictions about exactly when an earthquake will take place or where lightning will strike. However, that doesn’t prevent them from looking at the available evidence to develop models of how the underlying structures and processes causing these phenomena work. This enables them to understand them better and even if they’re not able to make precise predictions, they are able to make some statements about the likelihood of different events occurring. To Andrew Sayer and other realists, sociologists can be scientific by operating in very much the same way. Through careful analysis of the evidence they can uncover the often unobservable structures and processes which drive human societies. Thus, for example, Marxist analysis of social structure and processes such as the accumulation of profit can help sociologist to understand societies in a scientific way even if precise predictions are impossible.

Whether it is desirable for sociology to be a science therefore depends upon the precise definition of science that is adopted. However, it is certainly desirable for sociology to adopt some of the basic values of most versions of scientific research. These include an openness to new ideas, a willingness to amend ideas in the light of the evidence and an attempt to minimise the extent to which personal preferences and beliefs influence the interpretation of evidence. While social worlds cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate objects, there is much that sociologists can take from scientific approaches to ensure that sociology is much more than personal opinion.

**2.6 VALUES AND ETHICS**

P.167 FOCUS ON SKILLS: *ON THE RUN – RACISM AND CRIMINAL ‘JUSTICE’ IN THE USA*

**Suggested answers**

**1.** Alice Goffman decided to conduct her research on the basis of personal experiences acting as a tutor in poor, predominantly black neighbourhood of Philadelphia. She was motivated by her sympathy to the plight of young Black men in the area who were on the run from the police. Her personal experience of volunteering in the neighbourhood, and the sympathy she felt for the men who were on the run and their family members and girlfriends were very important in motivating her to carry out her research into this neighbourhood.

**2.** Positivist might argue that Alice Goffman fails to keep her distance from the people she is studying so it might be difficult for her to produce unbiased accounts. Furthermore, her interventions to help some of the men and to try to tackle racism in the American criminal justice system may have changed the very phenomena she was trying to study meaning that she would be unable to provide a description of it which was uninfluenced by her own activities. Much of the research was about her own interpretation of the situation, and therefore it was difficult or impossible to check the reliability of the findings.

**3.** Most of Goffman’s research follows the liberal model of committed sociology focusing on the perspective of the victims of racism and on the police. However, there are aspects of a radical/critical approach in her attempts to engage with the racism in the criminal justice system as a whole in the USA so her work straddles these two approaches.

**4.** You may adopt different positions on this issue. You could see her research as being biased personal opinion because she tends to downplay the effects of offending upon the victims and seems entirely sympathetic to the offenders. You could see Goffman as getting far too personally involved with individuals to be able to maintain any sort of objectivity. As such, you could argue that her approach is unbalanced and biased. On the other hand, you could argue that Goffman is performing a very useful function in researching the viewpoint and experience of the disadvantage and the oppressed which are very much neglected by official agencies, the mainstream media and other people in positions of power. Her work is clearly evidence-based and is driven by her detailed understanding of the situation of the men she studied based upon her own extensive observation. This work could be seen as valuable because it’s helps to highlight not just some injustices in the criminal justice system but also the counter-productive effects of an overzealous and racist system.

p.168 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** ‘Value-laden’ means that something is influenced by the ideas, preferences, morals and beliefs of the person that produced it. It is shaped by what someone believes is right and wrong rather than just what is objectively true.

**2.** Critical/radical sociology is any form sociology which believes that the purpose of the subject should be to uncover injustice, inequality and oppression in order to reduce or eliminate these things.

**3.** ‘Reflexivity involves reflection by sociologists on ways in which their own situation and life experiences may influence their research.

**4.** Personal values may inevitably enter sociological research because:

* Sociologists have to choose what to research and there is no objective way of doing this so it will inevitably be influenced by what sociologists believe to be important and unimportant.
* Sociologists are bound to be influenced to some extent by the society in which they live because this will shape how they see the world and in Gouldner’s terms will influence the domain assumptions that they make.
* All research involves some selection and interpretation of data and this is bound to be influenced to some extent by what the researcher personally believes is likely to be significant or important.

**5.** A postmodern approach suggests that research should consist of a variety of narratives from different viewpoints.

**6.** Liberal views in sociology focus on the victims of injustice and oppression whereas critical/radical approaches focus on those responsible for the victimisation. Liberal views do not have a well-developed model of the structure of power in society, whereas critical/radical approaches do.

**7.** Sayer believes that values are not simply a matter of opinion because it is possible to do research which objectively identifies whether people are harmed or thrive under different social arrangements based upon uncontentious measures of well-being such as life expectancy and rates of suicide.

**8.** Positivist can be criticised for ignoring the inevitability of personal values influencing the choice of topic for research and for believing that historical context will have no influence upon the interpretation of results (when in the view of its critics it will inevitably do so)

**9.** Functionalism could be seen as being committed to conservative values in that it’s tends to emphasise the positive contribution of different institutions to society and therefore has an inbuilt tendency towards supporting the status quo rather than social change. Marxism can be seen as being based upon a radical set of values because it assumes that all capitalist societies are based upon oppression and exploitation and should therefore be transformed through revolution.

**10.** Some sociologists do believe that it is possible for sociology to be objective. By objectivity they mean that phenomena can be described in a way that is not distorted by language or personal beliefs and is true to the nature of the thing being described. Most of the early sociologists who helped to found the subject believed in objectivity including Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. Durkheim, Comte and others put forward a positivist view which argued that by confining research to things which can be directly observed and/or measured and looking for statistical patterns to uncover relationships the personal beliefs of the researcher could be excluded from the subject. To Durkheim ‘social facts’ were discoverable. And these existed independently of the observer and were therefore objective. The philosopher Karl Popper believed that social sciences in general can be objective so long as they produce testable theories which can be falsified. Max Weber also believe that in almost every respect sociology could be objective. The exception was the selection of topics for research. He argued that there was no objective way of selecting what to study and that in this regard the personal beliefs of the sociologist bound to have some influence. Apart from that though, Weber thought that sociologist could and should keep their personal opinions out of their research and should always be open to findings which they did not expect.

Despite the impressive range of early sociologists who believe that objectivity was both possible and desirable, many have challenged this view. Indeed, it has been claimed that sociologist such as Weber, Marx and Durkheim were all influenced by their values and their ideas are at least in part shaped by the societies in which they live. For example, Alvin Gouldner claims that Weber’s own research reflected his left-of-centre views and his emphasis upon individual freedom.

Opponents of the idea that sociology can be value free argue that values can influence sociology in a number of ways. As Greg Philo and David Miller claim the funding of research by business and government may silence critical voices and Alvin Gouldner suggests that the personal ambitions and career goals of sociologist might influence what they research on how they interpret their findings. Certainly, certain types of research such as research into environmental sociology have had limited funding and have remained on the periphery of the subject, while other types of research which have more potential benefits to governments or businesses has been better funded (e.g. research into efficiency in the provision of health services). Personal beliefs and interests are bound to influence research to some extent and even the sex of the researcher can have an effect. Harding points out that men often neglect subject which are of more interest to women and the reverse may also be true. Postmodernists such as Lyotard regard science itself as based upon a number of assumptions about the nature of society and, from this point of view, even following a scientific method therefore reflects values and is not objective. According to Foucault, the way people talk and think about any issue, that is the discourse that they use, inevitably reflect certain assumptions making it impossible to rise above values and have an objective approach to any subject.

Alvin Gouldner concludes that it is not possible to separate fact and value in sociology and that therefore researcher should come clean about what their values are so that readers can make up their own minds about how far these values have influenced her research. Feminists also argue that your standpoint is inevitably affected by your position in society and standpoint epistemology makes a virtue of this claiming that your understanding of the world has to be grounded in personal experience to some extent. Critical sociologists in general celebrate the inclusion of values in sociological research arguing that sociology which is committed to changing and improving society is valuable and necessary.

It is difficult to see how sociology can ever be completely objective given that sociologist, like other humans, are members of society and as such their thought processes and understanding of the world are influenced by the social worlds in which they live. Nevertheless, it may be possible to limit the extent to which the findings of research are distorted by personal preferences through the use of rigorous methods and through sociologists having an openness to data which contradicts their presuppositions. Critical sociologists such as Phil Carspecken believe that it is perfectly possible to combine committed sociology with a rigourous search for a true understanding so that while sociology can never be totally objective, it can be much more than personal opinion.

**2.7 SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY**

P.172 FOCUS ON SKILLS: FUNDING, RESEARCH AND CENSORSHIP

**Suggested answers**

**1.** Walters means that the researchers are trying to get what they want (research grants) without being consumed by the organisation that provides those grants (the Home Office) in a way that prevents them from carrying out honest and critical research.

**2.** The government can use its power by deciding what types of research project get funding and how much funding they receive. They can also cut-off funding part way through some research if that research is becoming too critical of the government or a government department. In terms of disseminating research the government can refuse to publish findings which it does not like, or bury findings in obscure places.

**3.** Gaining research grants is essential to the careers of university academics but those who provide the grants may compromise the independence of the researchers. Without obtaining research grants sociologists may find that they are unable to retain their jobs or unable to gain promotion. Academics are often also passionate about discovering more about their chosen specialisms and consequently may be prepared to accept restrictions on their research to make their research possible at all. They may also feel that through providing research for government departments they may have an influence on government policy and they could be committed to producing change and trying to improve those policies.

**4.** You may have different views on this. However, you could argue that the government has a strong influence because directly or indirectly it does fund a great deal of research. Although some money comes from the private sector this is most likely to be for research which supports particular commercial interests rather than finding out about sociological issues. Other money is available through charities such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (which supports research into poverty), but the funds available to such charitable foundations, are more limited than those available to the government. The government channels some money through research bodies to some extent such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which creates some separation between the government about decisions about funding research, but the government still has control over the overall budget of such councils and departments fund a lot of research directly. Not all research is funded by government and some research can be conducted by sociologists without needing funding. Some critical researchers consciously decide not to take government or business money in order to maintain their independence since very often there research can be critical of governments.

p.177 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** ‘Social policy’ refers to the way the government distributes and redistributes resources to provide ‘services, facilities and opportunities’ for people living in the country which they govern. Social policy includes the way the government governs such things as health, education, social security, housing, the distribution of income and so on. Local government and charities are also responsible for some social policy.

**2.** A ‘social problem’ is behaviour by members of the society which is seen to be harmful in some way and is therefore seen as needing intervention to prevent or discourage it or to limit the negative effects of that behaviour.

**3.** A ‘sociological problem’ is some feature of social life which sociologists have decided is interesting or puzzling and which, from their point of view, requires understanding or explanation.

**4.** Social policy can be influenced by sociology in the following ways:

* By highlighting problems which were previously neglected such as domestic violence.
* By providing data to analyse the effectiveness of policies, for example by conducting research on the effects of different education systems on class inequality.
* By proposing new policies, for example Right Realist criminological suggestions on zero tolerance.

**5.** One theory that suggests a capitalist economy should be the foundation on which social practices are developed is neoliberalism. (Other examples are New Right sociology and functionalism).

**6.** Marxists believe in revolutionary change whereas social democratic views support more piecemeal and gradual change. Social democratic views support equality of opportunity whereas Marxist views support greater equality of outcome (for example in terms of the distribution wealth).

**7.** Giddens. Third Way tries to combine left- and right-wing approaches seeing a capitalist economy as the foundation of society but using social democratic approaches to produce more equal opportunities. This supports more cooperation between public and private sectors, for example using private money in public services and by introducing elements of the competitive market into some public services.

Critical sociologists find this claim unconvincing. Jenny Kitzinger (1999), a member of the GUMG, argues that “Many of the terms widely used in media/cultural studies obscure vital processes in the operation of media power. Concepts such as 'polysemy', 'resistance' and 'the active audience' are often used to by-pass or even negate enquiry into the effects of cinema, press or televisual representations. Our work shows that the complex processes of reception and consumption mediate, but do not necessarily undermine, media power. Acknowledging that audiences can be 'active' does not mean that the media are ineffectual. Recognising the role of interpretation does not invalidate the concept of influence.”

**8.** Sociology can also influence social policy through providing research which allows charitable organisations to provide help to certain social groups and it can also influence public opinion which in turn affects whether government social policies are effective or not (for example by having to change attitudes towards domestic violence.)

**9.** Sociological research helped to encourage the change to the comprehensive system in the 1960s and 70s and Right Realism in criminology has influenced zero tolerance policies on policing.

**10.** Many sociologists have contradicted the claim in his question and have argued that sociology does have some influence on social policy. Nevertheless, there are reasons for believing that the influence is limited but perhaps rather greater than that suggested by the question.

According to the Social Policy Association, social policy is concerned with decisions about the distribution of resources and services by governments and other agents such as charitable foundations. Sociology is not intended necessarily to be specifically concerned with influencing social policy and in its purest form is more concerned with understanding and explaining how society works, but inevitably the two are connected and many individual sociologists certainly believe that the subject should be used to help to shape policies. Although positivist believe that sociology should act more like a pure science uninterested in how the findings are used, in practice positivistic and statistical research is undoubtedly used quite extensively by policymakers. Furthermore, critical social scientists and those advocating social democratic perspectives, believe that sociology can and should be used to create greater social justice, while New Right and neoliberal sociologists also believe that their research should be used to influence policy, although to achieve different objectives such as efficiency.

There are plenty of reasons for supposing that the influence of sociology on policies is quite limited. Government actions are likely to be influenced as much by the desire to attract support from voters as to follow policies which have a sound basis in social scientific evidence. Furthermore, there are many examples which suggest that governments only tend to fund research which they think is likely to produce findings which support their policies and do not challenge them. The government has considerable influence on academic research through its control over funding for the Economic and Social Research Council. Getting research grants is crucial to sociologists’ career progress so they are under strong pressure to carry out research which supports government policies rather than contradicts and tries to change it. Furthermore, sociologists have highlighted many issues without obviously making a significant difference to government policies on those issues. For example, issues of poverty, educational underachievement, gender inequality, hate crimes and racism have all been of considerable concern to sociology. However, it has often taken outside events to put these on the public and political agenda. For example, sociologists highlighted police racism before this became a public issue, but it was only with the murder of the Black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent report that this issue was taken seriously by governments. Action to counteract educational underachievement among some groups has tended to follow the ideological position of different governments rather than any details of sociological research. Similarly sociologists have highlighted the damaging effects of increasing inequality of wealth and income over several decades, but no governments has made the reduction of inequality a central policy aim.

Nevertheless, it may be an exaggeration to say that sociology has ‘almost no’ influence on social policy. Apart from central government, sociology can influence bodies such as local councils and individual state-funded institutions such as colleges and universities. Sociology has an influence on transnational organisations such as the United Nations which in turn have some influence on policies. Sociology can also influence public opinion by highlighting issues and through the effect on voters it can then help shape government policy. For example, sociological research has played an important role in highlighting modern-day slavery and people-trafficking, an issue was taken forward by the new Prime Minister Teresa May shortly after she came to office in 2016. Detailed sociological research can help to refine particular policies, for example policies on crime prevention and policing. Sometimes politicians do take ideas from sociological theory and research, and again policing policies (such as zero tolerance) are a good example. Some governments have been influenced by sociological ideas, although they tend to be rather selective about the particular perspectives that they draw on depending upon whether they have an ideological affinity with different groups of sociologist. For example, right-wing governments have drawn on some neoliberal ideas from sociology, but sociology is probably have more influence on the left’s of centre governments, particularly Labour ones. In the New Labour era from 1997 to 2010 the ideas of the sociologist Anthony Giddens has some influence on policies which followed what Giddens called the Third Way, for example in using private providers in public services.

Overall sociology has a limited role in influencing social policy, but to say it plays almost no role is an exaggeration. Both directly and indirectly sociological research helps to set the agenda both in public debate and this indirectly helps to influence government policy. Sociologists pioneered the study of many areas of social life which would later become issues of public concern, but the influence of sociology can be indirect and can take time to have any impact. Politicians tend to use sociological research selectively to support policies which they think are likely to be popular and which reflect their own ideological preferences, but nevertheless policy ideas do sometimes come from sociology and policies are sometimes refined to make them more effective in the light of sociological research.