

SHOULD SOCIOLOGY BE SCIENTIFIC?

Positivists claim that science uses established methods and procedures, and that these methods and procedures can be applied to the social sciences. They believe that social facts can be observed objectively, measured and quantified. Analysis of statistics can reveal correlations, causes and ultimately laws of human behaviour. From this point of view, sociological studies using such methods can be considered to be scientific. Positivists see the use of scientific methods as highly desirable, and they tend to be critical of those sociologists who study subjective and unobservable mental states.

Popper (1959) also sees it as highly desirable that sociology should be scientific. He rejects many sociological theories as being unscientific because they are not sufficiently precise to generate hypotheses that can be falsified. He is particularly critical of Marxism for failing to make precise predictions: for example, for failing to specify exactly when and under what circumstances a proletarian revolution would take place in capitalist societies.

Like positivists, then, Popper believes that it is possible for sociology to become scientific by following a particular set of methodological procedures. He parts company with positivists in denying that science can deliver the final truth, since the possibility of falsification always exists. Instead he believes that the longer a theory has stood the test of time, the more often researchers have failed to falsify it, the closer it is likely to be the truth.

Phenomenologists reject the view that natural science methodology is appropriate to sociology. To phenomenologists, objective observation and measurement of the social world are not possible. The social world is classified by members of society in terms of their own stereotypes. In these circumstances the social world cannot be measured objectively; statistics are simply the product of the categorization procedures used. The best that sociologists can hope to do is to study the way that members of society categorize the world around them. They cannot collect meaningful statistical data and establish correlations, connections and laws. Indeed, phenomenologists reject the whole possibility of finding laws of human behaviour.

Despite the claims of positivists and Popper, it seems inappropriate for a subject that deals with human behaviour to confine itself to studying the observable, to ignore the subjective, to try to falsify theories or to make precise predictions. However, partly in response to such problems, the realist theory of science – which stresses the similarities between social and natural science – has been developed. Russell Keat, John Urry (1982), and Andrew Sayer (1984) argue that none of the above points disqualifies sociology from being a science. They believe that positivists, and Popper in particular are mistaken about the nature of science.

To realists, then, both Popper and positivists have failed to define science accurately, and so the objections raised by interpretive sociologists to seeing sociology as a science become irrelevant. Realists see science as the attempt to explain the causes of events in the natural or social world in terms of underlying and often unobservable structures, mechanisms, and processes.

According to the realist view of science, much of sociology is scientific. To realist sociologists such as Keat and Urry (1982), Marxist sociology is scientific because it develops models of underlying structures and processes in society, which are evaluated and modified in the light of empirical evidence. Unlike positivists, realists do not automatically reject interpretive sociology as unscientific, because they

believe that studying unobservable meanings and motives is perfectly compatible with a scientific subject.

One of the reasons that sociologists have been so concerned with the question of whether sociology is a science is the widespread assumption that science is objective, or 'value-free'.

Many of the founders of sociology believed that sociology could and should be value-free. Early positivists such as Comte and Durkheim argued that objectivity was attainable by adopting a 'scientific' methodology. Marx also believed that his sociology was object and 'scientific', although he saw society very differently. Weber did not think complete value-freedom was possible, but he did believe that, once a topic for research had been chosen, the researcher could be objective. He argues that sociologists should not make value judgements, that is, they should not state what aspects of society they found desirable or undesirable.

Functionalists in general have been accused of holding politically conservative views in assuming that existing social institutions serve a useful purpose. Durkheim accepted the need for certain changes in society, but his personal values are evident in his belief that the inheritance of wealth should be abolished and professional associations should be established.

Few would claim that Marx's sociology was free from his political and moral beliefs. Marx's desire for proletarian revolution influenced most aspects of his work.

Weber's work often appears more value-free than that of functionalists or Marxists, but there is little doubt that his personal values influenced by his research. Weber's writings on bureaucracy are strongly influenced by his fear that bureaucratic organizations would stifle human freedom.

The values of other sociologists have also been evident in their choice of topics for research. Peter Townsend demonstrated his belief that poverty is a serious problem by devoting years of his life to its study. Marxists have shown the importance they attach to inequality in their studies of wealth, income, and stratification. Feminists have revealed their values by deciding that is important to study such aspects of social life as domestic violence, rape, and housework. Simply by selecting an issue to study, sociologists reveal what aspects of society they believe are significant.

Some postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984) reject altogether the possibility of producing any objective knowledge. To Lyotard the creation of knowledge is just a language game, which can only be judged in terms of its saleability. There is no way of distinguishing between true and untrue knowledge, no way of being objective. For many postmodern writers, knowledge simply reflects the viewpoint and the values of different social groups. No one viewpoint and set of values can be seen as superior to any other.

Given these problems, sociology might appear to consist of little more than personal opinions. If this were the case there would seem little point in the subject existing.

Empirical investigations, which are more than the subjective interpretations of individuals, mean that sociology can be more than just value-laden opinions. Truth claims, even if accepted now, may be rejected at some point in the future. A consensus about what is and is not true may break down. However, because they are based upon reaching agreements about what is true, they have a more solid foundation than individual interpretations.

Carspeken even argues that, up to a point, values can be evaluated as well. He uses the example of somebody arguing that poverty is not bad because 'there has always been poverty and always will be; it is natural' (Carspecken 1996). In this case the value claim that poverty is not bad can be critically examined by using examples of societies, which have no poverty, and by trying to show that some things which are natural are not necessarily good.

If Craspecken's views are correct, then values are integral to sociology and indeed to all disciplines, but that does not prevent empirical testing of theories. Sociology can make claims about truth and hope to gain acceptance for them. From this viewpoint, sociologists should also accept and welcome a commitment to using the production of sociological knowledge to try to improve society.