

Sociology and Social Policy

Social policy generally refers to the tackling of social problems. It looks at how the actions of governments (local and national) affect the lives of its members. – Both positively and negatively

As far as sociology is concerned, the big questions are

- Should sociologists get involved in social policy making?
- Should sociological research inform policy making?
- Should sociology look at the effects of social policies?

It is important to distinguish between social problems and sociological problems:

- **Social problems** are ...social behaviours 'that cause public friction and/or private misery...and calls for collective action to solve it' (Worsley 1977). E.g. poverty
- **Sociological problems** is 'any pattern of relationships that call for explanation' (Worsley 1977)

So most social problems will also be seen as sociological problems...poverty is worth sociological scrutiny – but not all sociological problems can be regarded as social problems! E.g. why do people obey rules?

So some sociologists are not interested in solving social problems but merely want to report on what goes on in society. Others however feel that in digging deep in certain areas it is impossible to remain detached and not want to do something about a problem e.g. poverty. (See values sheet)

Many sociologists are directly employed by groups with particular interests in social problems – the government, charities, housing associations etc. Having a direct input in policy is desired.

Postmodernists see no role for sociology in the realm of social policy making as sociology should merely exist to give individuals an understanding of their own personal; lives within a social context

Functionalism

Functionalists are heavily into consensus in society and see the government as acting for the good of its citizens. Social policies are used for the good of all, helping society to run in a harmonious fashion.

Look back on your family and education notes to see a whole array of policies aimed at helping groups in society.

The role of the sociologist is to pass objective data to the policy makers.

Critics – such as Marxists – argue that policies are not aimed at equalizing for all and cause more conflict than balance.

Marxism

Marxists see social policies as serving the interests of the capitalist system

- They legitimize exploitation – e.g. education policies 'pretend' to offer equal opportunities for all – but do not!
- It keeps a docile labour force
- They act as measures of social control – when conflict arises policies are offered to appease the working class – they are conned and bought off – part of the false consciousness process.

Marxists do recognize that some policies are aimed at doing good and some do benefit the working class – but often they see policies akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic.....the whole ship of capitalism is what needs to be sunk!

Feminism

Feminists see society in a state of conflict - between genders.

Feminists argue that their research has had a big impact on social policies since the 1960's.

- **Education** – children's books, learning materials etc have less gender bias
- **Family** – policies reflect domestic and work place changes for women
- **Domestic violence** – women's refuges, police handling of cases etc

Does sociology influence social policy?

Even when sociologists are directly concerned with research into social problems, there is no guarantee that their work will affect the policy makers decisions.

A number of factors can affect this:

- **Cost** – Often seen as the bottom line – even when the government agrees with some research findings it may feel that it cannot afford to implement any relevant social policies
- **Funding** – related to the above [post is the source of the money for the research – Researchers may feel 'obliged' to find in favour of their paymasters, even subconsciously.
- **Elections** – near election time governments don't want to adopt a policy they feel may alienate the electorate.
- **Globalisation** – policies made within nation states may be ineffective against the forces of global change. Some large multi-national organizations like the IMF (International Monetary Fund) make decisions which cross cut whole continents.
- **Critical sociology** – literally because it is critical of much state policy (e.g. Marxism) it is rarely 'invited' to partake in policy making.

The New Right

- Believe that the state should have only minor involvement in social policy
- They believe that sociology can offer useful insights for policy makers but only if they aim at restoring individual responsibility for their own and their families' welfare.
- They support strong law and order policies (see broken window thesis in deviance notes)

In short they support sociological input into social policies as long as they are policies in line with their philosophy!"