

# Sociology And Science

With Psychology now being classified as a science at A level – where does this leave Sociology – Is it a science? Does it want to be classified as one?

## So what is science?

Science can be seen as a specific body of knowledge different from other forms such as magic, religion, philosophy etc. because it has 5 key components:

1. **Empirical** – basically this means that we can count and measure information.
2. **Testable** - scientific experiments can be repeated and retested and hence scientific knowledge is seen as more reliable than less testable forms.
3. **Theoretical** – science seeks causal relationships and doesn't rely simply on describing but seeks to explain
4. **Cumulative** – It builds on previous knowledge and moves forward out understanding of the world.
5. **Objective** – personal feelings, prejudices etc have no place in science. It has to be unbiased.

In the past Sociology has often pursued the kudos of being seen as a science – particularly by positivists. Durkheim was keen to have sociology seen as the science of society when he was made the first professor of the subject over 100 years ago.

More recent movements in sociology have been less keen to follow the science route – interactionists, postmodernists and feminists believe that a scientific approach is not suitable for studying social behaviour and that the pursuit of scientific status has been more about funding, prestige and status.

## Popper and Science - Falsification

Karl Popper (1902-94) believed that instead of trying to verify (prove true) theories, science uses the process of falsification – i.e. try to prove it wrong. By failing to prove the theory wrong then it shows the theory to have been rigorously tested.

Sociology would do well to adopt this approach, according to Popper as much of what has gone on before is not easily testable or capable of standing up to the falsification analysis – e.g. Marxism

## Kuhn – Paradigms

Kuhn (1970) argues that 'normal science' operates within a paradigm – an accepted framework of concepts and procedures.

Unlike perspectives in sociology where there is competition between various theories etc the scientific paradigm is rarely questioned. Only when a whole lot of research doesn't fit into the accepted paradigm is it challenged and ultimately a new paradigm is instated. Just think how homeopathic medicine struggles to fit into accepted science as we know it.

**Sociology doesn't have a shared paradigm and therefore by this definition is not scientific** – but Kuhn believed it could be given time!

## Keat and Urry - Realism

Keat and Urry (1982) stress the similarity between sociology and certain types of natural science.

They distinguish between open and closed systems

**Closed Systems** – this is where variables can be controlled and precise measurements can be taken – the typical lab experiment of physics, chemistry and biology.

**Open Systems** – are where not all variables can be controlled – seismologists, vulcanologists, meteorologists etc all have elements which cannot be controlled .e.g. it cannot be accurately predicted just when and where an earthquake may happen.

**Sociology can fit into this realist view of science** as it seeks to uncover underlying structures and processes. We can't actually see social class – but we can see the effects of it!

## Is Sociology a science?

So what can we conclude about sociology and science

Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Positivists</b> see sociology as adopting the methods of the natural sciences – the focus on objectivity, quantitative data, reliability, generalisability etc means the 'ology' of society is the science of society</li> <li>• <b>Popper</b> says that sociology isn't scientific enough yet but has the potential to be if it focuses on falsification</li> <li>• <b>Kuhn</b> says it possibly can be if we ever get to the stage where one paradigm is accepted within the subject (just don't hold your breath)</li> <li>• <b>Realists</b> – say that with their definition of open systems sociology fits in rather well and therefore is scientific (according to this definition)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interpretivists</b> see human beings as conscious actors – they are not governed by external forces. Human behaviour cannot be studied in the same way as the natural world and therefore scientific analysis is not suitable.</li> <li>• <b>Feminists</b> – many are critical of adopting a scientific approach in sociology. Science is seen as malestream knowledge – based on male perceptions and understandings.</li> <li>• <b>Postmodernists</b> – argue that knowledge is itself relative to the world of those who seek it and there isn't a knowable world out there waiting to be discovered.. Science has set itself up as expert knowledge – but this is now outdated</li> </ul>

So the answer to the question, 'Is sociology a science?' is not easy to answer. As seen above some say yes definitely, some say yes with qualifications, some say no definitely not and some say 'why are we still bothered about such a debate?'

Moore et al sum up nicely 'somewhere in the middle lie the bulk of sociologists...who accept the debate.....but get on with their research attempting to make sense of society in the best ...way they can'

## Is science a science?

Some have turned the scientific spotlight back on science itself and argue that a lot of what goes on in the name of science does not actually fit the rigorous standards scientists like to believe they follow.

Feyerabend (1975) sees science as 'anarchic' and that the paradigm approach actually prevents new ideas coming to the fore.

Much of scientific research is in the commercial world and therefore cannot be truly unbiased. Funding sources, reputations and egos all challenge the ideal of objectivity