

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

**Module One:
Theory and Methods**

Unit M15: Value Freedom

These Notes been designed to provide you with a knowledge and understanding of the following syllabus area:

"Examine the nature of science and consider the extent to which sociology may be regarded as scientific".

The Aims of these Notes are to help you understand:

1. Definitions of objectivity, subjectivity and value-freedom.
2. Different forms of objectivity and subjectivity.

The Objectives of these Notes are to help you understand:

1. The difference between personal objectivity and methodological objectivity.
2. The difference between personal subjectivity and methodological subjectivity.
3. The concept of methodological value-freedom.
4. The relationship between practical and theoretical research considerations and sociological methodology.
5. The concept of self-censorship.

Introduction

In this section I want to **develop** some of the earlier **themes** we have encountered in relation to **science** and **methodology** by focusing upon the question of whether or not a "**value-free**" **sociology** is both **possible** and **desirable**.

In this respect, these Notes have been organised along the following lines:

- **Firstly**, we need to **define** the various major **concepts** involved in the above (those of **objectivity**, **subjectivity** and **value-freedom**) and to examine the way they can be **applied** to **sociological** forms of **research**.
- **Secondly**, we need to consider the **debate** between what Alan **Dawe** has called "**The Two Sociologies**" - the **Structuralist theoretical perspective** and the **Social Action (or Interactionist) perspective**. This follows because, at least in very general terms, sociologists working within each of these perspectives have developed **different viewpoints** about the **possibility** and **desirability** of **objectivity**, **subjectivity** and **value-freedom** in relation to the development of scientific knowledge.

We can start, therefore, with some **basic definitions**:

1. Value -freedom:

This idea revolves around the question of whether or not it is **possible** for sociologists to **study** the **social world** in a way **that does not allow the values held by the researcher to influence the outcome of their research**. In a sense, therefore, it is **not a question of whether or not the sociologist has values** (since, by definition, all human beings develop some kind of value system).

It is, rather, a **question of the extent** to which such **personal values** either do or do not **influence the production of knowledge** about either society as a whole or particular aspects of that society. In this sense, the concept of **value-freedom** relates to the **question** of whether or not the **sociologist** can be **personally objective** about their research.

In relation to the concepts of **objectivity** and **subjectivity**, I want to consider them in terms of **two distinct areas**:

a. Methods of research:

In particular, we have to address the question of whether or not it is possible / desirable for the sociologist to be personally objective?

b. Methodology:

In this respect, the focus is slightly different in that we have to consider **differing conceptions of the nature of the social world** (the theoretical perspectives I noted above) and the **question** of whether or not it is actually **possible** for **sociologists** to produce **objective knowledge** about the social world.

2. Objectivity:

- a. In terms of **methods of research**, a **basic definition** involves the idea that:

Sociologists deal with **facts** rather than simple **opinions**.

The **data collection process** is **uncoloured** by **personal feelings** (that is, sociologists attempt to collect data **reliably** and **systematically**).

- b. In terms of **methodology**, a basic **definition** involves the idea that the concept of **objectivity** becomes a **philosophy** (or **ideology**) that argues we can **define a reality that exists apart from the consciousness of individual social actors**.

The technical term for this is "**objectivism**" - the belief that the social world consists of various **social structures** that act to channel and control people's behaviour (in very broad ways).

An **example** of such a **structure** might be a **class system of stratification**, whereby the class into which an individual is born affects both their **life chances** and **experiences**.

3. Subjectivity:

- a. In terms of **methods of research**, a basic **definition** involves the idea that to be "**subjective**" involves **giving prominence to personal idiosyncrasy or individual points of view**. In effect, the concept of **subjectivity** as it relates to **data collection** basically means that the **researcher allows their values to intrude into the data collection process** in a way that creates some form of **bias**.

- b. In terms of **methodology**, a basic **definition** involves the idea that the concept of **subjectivity** becomes a **philosophy** (an **ideology**) that involves the **belief that all knowledge is subjective** and that there is **no external or objective test of truth**.

The technical term for this is "**subjectivism**" - the belief that human consciousness is so significant in relation to the way we experience the world it is both **impossible to separate our values from the research process** and the belief that because people create and recreate the social world on a daily basis this world is little more than an "**elaborate fiction**"; it has **no reality outside of the way we interpret and act towards the behaviour of others**.

Those of you who have encountered **post-modernist perspectives** will realise that this latter view is highly-significant for this perspective

Question:

I have suggested that the distinction between "methods" and "methodology" is a significant one in relation to sociological theory. Why might it be useful to make this distinction when discussing questions of value-freedom, objectivity and subjectivity?

Methods of Research: The meaning of Objectivity / Subjectivity (part 1).

In studying the social world, all **sociologists** want to make **meaningful statements** about that world. In addition, these **statements** have to carry **greater authority** than those that could be made by the **non-sociologist / non-scientist**. As we have seen, the way the **natural scientist** makes such **statements** is **instructive** in the above respect, since the **authority** or weight of such statements about the world rests upon the ability to:

Devise hypotheses that explain the relationship between observable phenomena.

Collect data systematically.

Test hypotheses against the data.

Question:

Why do "scientific statements" about the world carry more weight (or have more currency) than "non-scientific" statements about the world?

In effect, the **authority** of the scientist's statements rests upon:

The **rigour** of the **methodology** and **data collection methods** employed.

The **evidence** put-forward in support of (or **against**) a particular **hypothesis**.

In short, the **authority of scientific knowledge** derives from the fact it is **supported by evidence from a variety of sources** and that such knowledge has been extensively **tested** to try and **disprove** its **reliability** and **validity**.

Question:

What reasons can you provide to support the idea that all sociologists, irrespective of the perspective within which they work, want to be personally objective in their research?

If a sociological - or indeed natural scientific - statement about the world / society was simply based upon the **personal biases** (or **values**) of the individual researcher, it is evident that such a statement might be "**true**" or "**false**", "**valid**" or "**invalid**" - but it would not tell us very much about the nature of the world.

In short, since **every statement** made by every **individual** in society would have the **same basic authority or weight**, there would be **no way of distinguishing between valid and invalid knowledge** - **nothing would be true and nothing would be false...**

Note: Post-Modernism

Up to a point, this is an idea that post-modernist sociologists have been concerned to draw attention to and, although this is not the place to discuss post-modernist ideas in any great detail, it is nevertheless important to note the contention that all knowledge is culturally-constructed.

A post-script at the end of these Notes looks at some post-modernist ideas in more detail

Since, as **sociologists**, we are trying to say something about the social world that has at least the **ring of truth** (whatever that loaded concept may actually mean), we have to **try** to adopt **an objective personal stance** in relation to such things as **data collection, rules of evidence** and so forth. In this respect, what all sociologists try to do is to produce **explanations, descriptions** and **analyses** that are **based** upon some form of **supporting evidence** and which are **free from personal bias**.

In this respect, in any **statement** about the world, the **values** of the person making such a statement **should not intrude** into the construction of that statement.

For **example**, the following are two personal statements based upon values:

- "I think the world is flat".
- "I think the world is round".

If there was **no socially-produced way of distinguishing between these two statements**, then **each would be equally valid** (and each of these statements has, at various times, been considered valid).

To be **objective**, in this respect, means to **gather evidence** that will allow us to treat the **statements** as a form of **hypothesis** (a suggested relationship between the world and its shape) and to then **test** each hypothesis **against** the **evidence** that we can collect, through various forms of **observation**, in a way that is as **free as possible from the intrusion of personal beliefs or bias**.

In this respect, **objectivity** involves the **establishment of procedures** for the **validation** (or **refutation**) of **hypotheses, theories** and so forth. That is, through the development of **a set of methodological principles** that will allow us to **validate / refute evidence** in accordance with **commonly-held, universally-applicable, rules of evidence**, we can come to **decisions** about the **relative plausibility** of **statements** about the world, **hypotheses** and so forth.

In this first sense of "objectivity / subjectivity", therefore, we need to establish:

1. That the **sociologist conforms** to a "**socially-approved**" **methodology** that **guides** the **development** of **hypotheses, data collection** and so forth.
2. That the **sociologist conforms** to **rules of evidence** (basically, that they **do not falsify data** and so forth).
3. That **data collection and analysis** must **not depend** on **personal prejudice**.

In the above sense, we are making reference to a form of "**scientific ethos**", much like the one outlined in the earlier parts of this section of the course. Such an ethos, therefore, might involve the following ideas:

- **Universalism**

This involves rules of evidence, evaluation, criticism and so forth that are agreed and can be applied to any form of scientific research

- **Communality**

This involves ensuring that **sociological research** is "**public knowledge**"

For **example, Goldthorpe, Lockwood et al** ("The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure"), provide detailed descriptions of their questionnaires, interview schedules and so forth for use by other sociologists.

- **Disinterestedness**

As **Berger** ("Invitation To Sociology") argues, the **task of the sociologist** is the **pursuit of knowledge "for its own sake"**. In other words, the **scientist does not have a personal stake in the outcome of their research.**

- **Organised Scepticism**

In basic terms, the scientist - social or otherwise - does **not** accept anything "**on trust**" or by "**faith**". **Organised Scepticism**, therefore, involves **the constant evaluation and critique of human knowledge.**

On the basis of the above, there is **nothing inherent in the sociological enterprise** that means that the researcher cannot uphold the above principles...

Methods of research: The meaning of Objectivity / Subjectivity (part 2).

While it is all well and good to argue that both natural and social scientists **should** strive to be **unbiased** in their observations, data collection and so forth, we can, for the sake of argument, **assume** it to be the case that **scientists do not consciously set-out to cheat**:

The fact that the **history of scientific research** is littered with **people** who did **cheat** is, of course, **significant**.

It is, however, **also significant** that **frauds** - within both the natural and social sciences - do tend to be **exposed**...

However, a more theoretically-fruitful avenue we can explore is **not** the **lack of objectivity** that derives from a **conscious attempt to cheat**. Rather, it is one that derives from the **nature of social scientific study** itself and we can, for want of a better term, call this a form of "**unconscious**" or "**systemic**" (that is, a quality of the system) **subjectivity**.

In this respect, we are **not concerned** with a form of **bias** that is **introduced** into the **research process**, but with a **form of subjectivity** that is **inherent** within the **research process itself**.

In this sense, it is important **not** to see "**objectivity**" and "**value-freedom**" as necessarily **meaning the same thing**:

Max **Weber**, for example, argued that while **complete value-freedom** was **not possible** (since, by definition, all human actors possess values and all human interaction is based upon value-judgements), he did argue that it **was possible** for **sociologists** to be **personally objective** in their research.

Question:

How might it be possible to be both personally objective and, at the same time, aware of any value-judgements intruding into the research process?

Weber, amongst others, argued that it was possible to square this circle by **identifying** and making clear the **initial assumptions** the **researcher is using in their research**. In this way, since such **assumptions** are made **clear**, it is up to **other researchers** to **show** these **assumptions** are **invalid or mistaken**.

In this respect, it is evident that, in a **systemic sense**, **values** must **intrude** into the **research process** in a number of ways. For **example**:

1. The selection of a subject-matter to research:

Since the list of possible **subjects** is almost **limitless**, the researcher has to make some kind of **initial judgement** about his or her **chosen subject area** being of greater importance than any other potential subject-matter.

2. Questions a researcher asks and the observations they choose to make:

Again, since these areas are potentially **limitless**, some form of **value-judgement** must intrude if the research is to take place.

3. The interpretations about the collected data the researcher makes:

In particular, this involves questions about **how to interpret data** that **does not fit** into the **expectations** we have, as human beings, already formulated. This is important because it is impossible for us, as human beings, not to have some **preconceived expectations** about the data we collect. The simple act of data collection itself, for example, involves **preconceived notions** about what kind of data will or will not be significant.

4. The perspective within which the researcher has chosen to work:

Conflict theorists, for example, are directed towards evidence of such things as **class domination, exploitation, power inequalities** and so forth.

Consensus theorists, on the other hand, attempt to explain the basis of social order in terms of **consensus, shared values** and the like.

Thus, in this second meaning of the terms, the idea of "**objectivity**" **does not mean "without the influence of values"** (since, as I have already noted, this is a logical impossibility). **To be objective**, therefore, is for the **researcher to identify** and make clear the **assumptions** (or values) they are using in their research.

Since it is **logically impossible** to be "**value-free**", the concept of **value-freedom** has to **mean the process whereby the researcher objectively identifies the values they are using** and makes these values clear for other researchers to test and criticise. For **example**, a researcher might argue that:

- Using assumptions X, Y, Z the nature of the reality being studied is one thing.
- Using assumptions A, B, C the nature of the reality being studied is something else.

The above is **not something peculiar to the social sciences**, of course, since **all research** involves the above types of **value-judgements** (should, for example, governments spend money on space travel, defence or medical research?).

In addition, **natural scientists** are forced to **specify the assumptions** on which their observations are based, experiments carried out and so forth, since in this way **other scientists** can **challenge or change** the **assumptions** being made to see if a different outcome ensues: For **example**, the observation that "Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade" is a statement based upon a number of **assumptions** - it is **not**, in itself, a **scientific statement**:

Question:
What assumptions does a natural scientist use in making the above statement?

In this simple example, the statement "Water boils at 100 degrees centigrade" is **not** a scientific statement, as such, because it is **possible to disprove it**.

A **scientist** making such a statement would **add** that the above is **true** (i.e. scientific) **only if we assume that the experiment is carried out at sea-level** (that is, in scientific terms, at **Standard Temperature and Pressure**). Thus, if we were to attempt this experiment on top of a mountain, we would find that water, in this instance, boils at a temperature considerably below 100 degrees centigrade, because there is less atmospheric pressure at such altitudes...

5. Scientific research is carried-out in the "real world":

The "real world", in this respect, is one that is defined by such questions as:

- **Who pays** for the research?
- **Who benefits** from the outcome of the research?

In the **real world** of **research grants, funds** and **jobs**, scientists come under **pressure** to follow particular lines of research, adopt particular methods and so forth if they want their work published, applied and the like.

In this respect, just as a **journalist learns** to give their editor the kind of story that will be printed in a particular newspaper, so too do **researchers learn** which types of research will attract funding, grants, publication and the like.

This is **not** to say that researchers falsify their data and conclusions; rather, it means that a researcher, for example, comes under pressure to adopt one particular method of research rather than another method of research:

Adriana **Caudrey** ("Whose Research?"), for example, notes a number of the potential problems faced by sociologists in relation to the idea of "**academic freedom**". For **example**, she notes that **government-funded sociological research in Britain** has to basically **conform to two main criteria**:

1. It has, by and large, to be **statistical** (that is, **quantitative**).
2. The last Conservative government did not fund research into such areas as:

- Levels of poverty in Britain
- The distribution of wealth
- Differences in life chances based upon social class

In this respect, a form of "**self-censorship**" comes into operation, whereby the **government doesn't actually ban** social scientists from the study of the kinds of areas noted above. However, it **doesn't provide funds** for these areas either, which **effectively bans** extensive research into such areas. The "self-censorship" comes into operation because the sociologist learns they will not obtain government funding for research into poverty levels, therefore, why waste time making applications for government funding?

Thus, because the British government is one of the main providers of funds for social research, it can effectively dictate:

- The **methodology and methods** used by the scientist
- The **areas** it is permissible to study.

In this sense, the sociologist who wants to do a **participant observation study into experiences of poverty in Britain** will have **less chance** of attracting government **funding** than the sociologist who wants to do a **quantitative analysis** of ways of **improving police efficiency...**

Question:

In what ways might the source of funding for a piece of research involve questions of "value-freedom" for the sociologist(s) involved?

All of the above involve the application of **value-judgements** and **apply equally** to the **natural sciences** as to the social sciences and it is important that we keep such questions in mind when talking about value-freedom and the influence of values on the research process. However, as I have attempted to make clear in the distinction I have just drawn, **objectivity** may well be **possible** within the research process if:

1. We reveal the values that direct our research:

The assumptions we are using can then be manipulated / tested / refuted by other scientists.

2. We keep values out of the testing of particular hypotheses:

If we do not select evidence on the basis of our values, then there is the possibility that the results of our research will be both reliable and valid.

3. The hypotheses we construct can be logically refutable:

That is, we construct hypotheses that can be tested and, at least in principle if not necessarily in fact, be shown to be invalid.

Before we turn to look at the **second general meaning** of the terms "**objectivity** and **subjectivity**", there are a number of **further observations** that can be made in relation to the above:

1. Our theoretical preferences must determine what we collect evidence about:

For **example**, working within different theoretical perspectives will determine, broadly, our perception of what is significant, insignificant and so forth.

2. Since our values determine this initial process, it follows that our values necessarily determine what we consider to be knowledge about the social world.

In this respect, **all knowledge about the social world** is a **product** of the **society** within which it **originates**. That is, it is **culturally-produced** and, in a sense, **culturally conditioned**.

Max **Weber** expressed this latter idea when he noted that,

"What is worthy of being known in one culture may not be considered worthy of being known in another culture.",

and, in this respect, **values play a crucial role** in the **production of cultural knowledge**. We can further illustrate this idea by comparing two different sociological perspectives on the nature and origin of values

- **For Functionalists:**

Values arise and prevail because they are **structurally necessary** (functional to society at a particular moment in its development): Thus, a value concerning the importance of "women as child-rearers" arises and prevails because:

Children need to be cared-for (and, as childhood becomes prolonged it requires more and more effort)

An emotional-bond between mother and child makes women best-suited to this role.

In this respect, therefore, any society is seen to be **forced** to develop the knowledge that it needs...

- **For Conflict theorists:**

Values reflect and serve the interests of the powerful.

Thus, **knowledge** produced in any **culture** will reflect its **underlying power structure**. In an **unequal world**, therefore, the **production of knowledge** is **fundamentally ideological**. Society does **not** produce the knowledge it needs, but rather the current development of knowledge about the social world reflects the interests of **what powerful groups need**. Thus, in relation to **women's role**:

Children need to be cared for

The most powerful of the sexes are men

Women are forced into adopting the role of child-rearer because it suits men that this should be the case.

Ideological rationalizations (instincts, emotional bonds, etc.) are attached to justify women's exploitation...

In another respect, if we look at the **nature of the education system in Britain**, it is clear that both the general shape of the curriculum (what subjects are studied and the nature of the knowledge taught), represent **ideological** (or value-based) **judgements** about the nature and relative status of knowledge in our society.

The **methodological / epistemological problem** that arises, in this respect, is that just as we have **no objective way** of deciding whether one value is "better" than another, it follows that **knowledge itself cannot be objectively evaluated** and all that we are left with is a kind of "**cultural relativism**"...

Question:

Outline the basis of the distinction that can be made between personal objectivity and systemic value-judgements and illustrate ways the sociologist can overcome the problems associated with the latter

While I do not particularly want to go into the above in any great detail, it does serve to sensitise you to the next meaning of the ideas "objectivity / subjectivity" that I now want to discuss.

Methodology: The Meaning of "Objectivity / Subjectivity"

The **second general meaning of objectivity / subjectivity** relates to the question of **whether or not** the **social world** itself can be considered to have an **objective form of existence** over and above the individual subjective experiences, interpretations and meanings of the people who make-up that world:

In this respect, it is less a question of whether or not sociologists can be **personally objective** and more a **question** of the **objective / subjective nature** of the **social world** itself. For **example**, **natural science** proceeds from a first principle of **objectivism**: That is:

The idea that there exists a natural world governed by the operation of "natural laws".

These laws (whatever they may be) are seen to govern the nature of the relationship between inanimate matter.

Because the world is effectively **external** to the **researcher**, the process of "**doing science**" is basically one of **discovery** (or "**heurism**" if you want to be pedantic about it):

"**Facts**" exist and they can be **discovered** / collected and their relationship explained.

Although debates do occur about methods, methodology and the possibility of the scientist affecting his / her research by their presence, there is a **general, methodological, agreement** that it is **possible** to **discover / theorise causal relationships** and to produce laws / law-like statements about the natural world. Both positivist and realist science in sociology - albeit in their different ways - conform to this idea of **objectivism**.

An **example** of such a debate might be, **Heisenburg's Uncertainty Principle** which holds that the **act of measuring / quantifying the natural world affects** - in some unknown way - **the world that is being studied**.

A simple **example**, in this respect, might be that the act of measuring tyre pressure involves letting air out of the tyre as you measure it - therefore, you are not ever actually measuring the true pressure of the air within the tyre...

However, another branch of sociology (**Interactionism**) argues that the **social world** is **inherently subjective**:

There can be **no theoretical or practical separation** between the **subject** (the **researcher**) and the **object of study** ("**society**") because the **social world** is **composed entirely of people producing and reproducing their world on a daily basis**.

In this respect, **what may pass for knowledge "yesterday" may not constitute valid knowledge "today"** and **what passes for valid knowledge "today" may not constitute valid knowledge "tomorrow"...**

On this point, this is probably an appropriate moment to consider in more detail what Alan **Dawe** (British Journal of Sociology, 1970) has called "The Two Sociologies" (and you thought these Notes were just thrown together off the top of my head, with no planning or organisation involved...).

1. Objectivism...

The **early development of sociology** (the ideas of **Comte**, **Durkheim** and **Marx**, for example) was overwhelmingly **concerned** with the **problem of social order**: Societies appear to display certain **basic patterns** or **regularities** in individual behaviour and the existence of such regularities (such as patterns of suicidal behaviour, for example) **suggests** some form of **external constraint** upon individual actions and behaviours:

Durkheim, for example, **theorised** this as a "**collective consciousness**". That is, a **general set of social beliefs** about what is **good, proper, right** and so forth that **arises** from the **interaction process** within society. The **collective conscience** is **rooted** in **individual behaviour**, but it **appears** to take-on an **externalised form** because the relationships people (as social beings) necessarily create **produces** a set of **norms, values, routines and responsibilities** that **appear** (to all intents and purposes) to take-on a **life of their own** over and above the individual's personal beliefs, desires and actions.

In this respect, therefore, we **experience** the world as an **external reality** that **constrains** our **choices of action**. Thus, certain "**social facts**" arise which, **Durkheim** argues, we can effectively consider as "**things**" that can be studied sociologically:

Just as in the **natural world** there are **facts** we can elaborate, so too with human behaviour there are "facts" about the nature of a particular society that can be discovered and explained.

Dawe ("The Two Sociologies") expresses this idea thus:

"Reduced to its essentials, the argument is that, since individual's cannot of their own volition create and maintain order, constraint is necessary for society to exist at all; without it, the only possibility is the war of all against all.

Accordingly, society must define the social meanings, relationships and actions of its members for them. And, because it is thus assigned priority over them, it must in some sense be self-generating and self-maintaining."

What this, in turn, boils down to is:

1. Societies develop a **central value system** (for whatever reason).
2. Values are passed-down through the socialisation process.

If, therefore, we can **identify patterns of values**, patterns of **interaction**, patterns of **meaning** and so forth, then it is **objectively possible** to study such things "as if" they were real. In this respect, sociologists have no need to look at what, for example, a social situation **means** for particular individuals, since the **meaning itself** is **socially-constructed** through the operation of **specifiable structural relationships**.

Question:

Dawe notes that the basis of the "objectivism" argument is that society is experienced "as if" it were real. What arguments can you put-forward to support the idea that the meanings held by individual social actors are socially-produced?

In the above terms, while people do have **consciousness** and hold **subjective meanings** about the world, the **theoretical significance** of these for sociological study is that such ideas are **relatively unimportant** since:

- If **society** is created from the relationships between people (it is, in effect, something that is **greater than the sum of its individual parts**):
- These relationships effectively (for the purpose of study) "take-on a life of their own":
- The **value-systems** that are involved in the maintenance and reproduction of social systems are, in turn, passed down from one generation to the next via the socialisation process:
- **Individual values, ideas, meanings** and so forth are no-more than "simple" expressions of **structural imperatives** or **necessities**:

Our interpretation of the world, therefore, is **conditioned** by **over-riding social values** and, if such **interpretations** simply **express** such **values** they **do not represent meaningful objects of study in their own right**. In this sense, our **values reflect our experiences** in the world and since these experiences are **socially-conditioned**, values, meanings and actions are merely the **expression of structural imperatives**.

- Because we **cannot see** these **imperatives**, it **appears** to us as if our **behaviour** is the **product** of our **subjective interpretations** but, because all behaviour is socially-directed, **human consciousness** is simply a **product** of the (**selective**) **internalisation** of **external realities**:
- What **appears** to us as **choice (interpretation)** is simply the **product** of **social relationships** at the **structural level** of society:

Thus, **if this is the case**, we should be able to:

- Study objective features of human societies.
- Study these features objectively (in a personal sense).

As **Dawe** notes:

"...subjective meanings are, through the existence of consensus, ultimately derived from the central value system and are thus, at root, external conditions of an actor's situation".

In the above sense, it **doesn't really matter** if this central value system is the product of consensus or conflict. What matters is:

1. It exists.
2. It produces a set of **structural imperatives** that people have to follow.

Gross, Mason and McEachern ("Explorations in Role Analysis", 1958) argue that if **subjective meaning** derives from **structural consensus**, then it **ceases** to be a **significant variable** in the exploration of human social behaviour. All we have, as **sociologists**, to do in this respect is to **understand / explain** the **process** whereby **beliefs** become **internalised**.

If **Social Action** is a **product** of **external social stimuli**, it follows that such **stimuli** can be **isolated, researched** and **explained** in an **objective, scientific**, way since:

1. We have **resolved the problem of subjective meaning** by arguing that it is an **effect** of **structural relationships**.
2. We can study the **causes of behaviour objectively** because we have **removed** the element of **subjective interpretation** from the equation (which, however you want to look at it, is pretty damn convenient - a bit too convenient for some sociologists...).

Having looked at the **basic ideas** involved in "**objectivism**", it is now necessary to look at the **basic ideas** involved in "**subjectivism**"...

2. Subjectivism...

For **Social Action theorists**, the **equation** I have just outlined is basically **reversed** in the sense that "**society** itself" (a concept that is used in the loosest possible way) is seen to be the **product of meaningful social interaction**:

Thus, whilst we can clearly **talk** about such things as a "**social system**" or a "**social structure**", these are the **product** (or "**effect**") of human **interaction**, **not** the **cause** - such **things** "**exist**" only for as long as people **choose** to behave in particular ways.

Thus, for **subjectivism**:

1. External, objective, social reality is a "conceptual fabrication":

As sociologists (and as human beings - the two might not necessarily be the same thing...), we **conceptualise** a **sense of order**, of **timeless continuity**, of **external constraints**, on our behaviour and, in these terms, it is possible to study "**objectivated**" **features** of a society **at any given moment** in its development.

2. We cannot extrapolate these ideas or observations into laws or generalized statements about "human nature" or human society.

For **Social Action theorists**:

- a. Social life is a seamless web of changing beliefs, norms, values and so forth.
- b. In order to study the social world we have to **specify the initial conditions** under which "**society**" **operates** at **any given moment** in its development.
- c. We **can**, therefore, make **objective statements** about the nature of society at **any given moment** in its development, but we must remember that these **statements** are **themselves subjective** - they **relate only** to the nature of society at the **moment in which our research takes place** (which, as an aside, is probably why so much Interactionist research is relatively small scale, in-depth and cannot be **generalised**).
- d. In this sense, the **researcher imposes a conceptual definition of reality** upon the social world:
 - The social world is **not** governed by "laws"
 - There are no "facts" waiting to be discovered, only **subjective interpretations and experiences**.
- e. If we can **specify our conceptual definitions** of the world, then we can make **objective statements** that are **true**, but **only for as long as our conceptual definitions apply**.

In this sense we can argue that **sociology** can be both **subjective** and **objective** - but **not value-free** and "**natural scientific**".

Thus, from this viewpoint, **sociology can be**:

- **Subjective:**

Because it is created by living, conscious, human beings whose relationships are not fixed and unchanging.
- **Objective:**

Insofar as, if we hold certain **conditions theoretically static**, we can make **objective, non-value-directed, statements** about social interaction as it pertains at any given moment in social development.

Alternatively, it **cannot be**:

- **Value-free** (because the values of sociologists direct them to make conceptual definitions about "social reality").
- **Natural scientific** (because there can be no real separation between "man" and the society "he" creates). Therefore, there can be **no universal laws** of behaviour and **no predictions** can be made about **future forms** of behaviour.

Summary.

1. A basic distinction we can make is between personal objectivity / subjectivity and methodological objectivity ("objectivism") and subjectivity ("subjectivism").
2. Personal objectivity involves the idea that it is possible and desirable for the researcher to follow certain rules of practice and evidence in the collection of data.
3. Methodological objectivity (objectivism) involves the idea that the social world consists of a number of social structures that can be studied separately from the study of individual social actors.
4. Personal subjectivity involves the idea that the researcher allows their values and beliefs to intrude into the research process, such as to make their data collection unreliable and their interpretations invalid.
5. Methodological subjectivity (subjectivism) involves the idea that "social structures" cannot be studied separately from the study of individual social actors.
6. Weber has argued that it is not possible for a researcher to be personally value-free, since values are part of human consciousness. However, methodologically, value-freedom should be possible if a researcher clearly states the assumptions under which they are interpreting their data.
7. Natural science is not value-free in a personal sense (since scientists are human too). However, scientific statements are constructed by carefully specifying the conditions under which a statement about the world can be considered valid.
8. Although a form of scientific ethos exists within the Natural sciences, it is unclear as to the extent to which this prevents scientists deliberately cheating.
9. It is easier for the natural scientist to practice methodological objectivity because the subject matter of natural science does not have consciousness.
10. In broad terms, methodological objectivity tends to be associated with Structuralist perspectives in sociology, while methodological subjectivity tends to be associated with Interactionist perspectives.

Examination Questions.

1. With reference to the articles on page 6, there are a number of reasons put-forward as to why science cannot be seen as objective. What are the implications of this for the belief that sociology is a science? (4 marks).
2. How would you interpret the statement "Science is another form of ideology in society"? (4 marks).
3. "While personal value-freedom is impossible, methodological value-freedom is desirable". Evaluate this statement in relation to sociological research (10 marks).
4. To what extent can sociologists claim to be scientists? (25 marks).
5. With reference to at least two substantive areas of sociology, examine how observation techniques provide insight but lack objectivity (25 marks).

Post-Script

The following are Notes relating to post-modernist views of knowledge. They assume a reasonable level of understanding about post-modernism..

The critique of Metanarratives (Anti-Essentialism)

One of the key features of modern society, from the Enlightenment onwards, was a belief in progress; a belief that was underpinned by the idea that “facts” about the world existed to be discovered and it was the task of the scientist, both natural and eventually social, to discover these facts (and, by so doing, improve the nature of human society). This type of general set of beliefs is characterised by post-modern writers as a “**metanarrative**”.

In literal terms, metanarrative means a “big story”. It represents, in short, an explanation for everything that happens in a society. In Sociology, the concept of a metanarrative is sometimes referred-to as a “high level theory” or, more-usually, a perspective.

For example, sociological perspectives such as Functionalism, Marxism, Interactionism, Feminism and the like are all examples of what post-modernists call **metanarratives**, precisely because they attempt to account for all aspects of a society in terms of the perspective and the various theories it proposes (called “mid-range” or “mid-level theories” in technical terms. This type of theory will be used to explain one aspect of a particular sociological problem – for example, the mid-level theory of “cultural deprivation” has been used by Functionalist sociologists to explain differential educational achievement)

Outside of sociology /social science, various political and economic metanarratives could be noted. The concepts of “Capitalism”, for example, or “Communism” and “Fascism” are examples of metanarratives, as are things like “Religion” (Roman Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and so forth) and, probably most controversially, [page?] “Science” (and, in particular, the “Big Science” that argues that, ultimately, all of the Laws governing the behaviour of matter in the universe can be discovered and, eventually, related to a single, unified, Law)

One argument frequently put-forward against the post-modernist critique of metanarratives is based on the observation of two facts:

Firstly, that in many societies and situations people still cling to various forms of metanarrative belief and

Secondly, far from being in decline the power of metanarrative belief (whether it takes a religious or secular form) actually seems to be increasing amongst some social groups in some societies.

Taylor (“Investigating Culture and Identity”), for example, notes various examples of metanarrative belief that fall into one or sometimes both of the above categories:

Christian Fundamentalism in America

The Iranian (Muslim) Fundamentalist revolution

However, this type of criticism rather misses the point of the argument. The argument, to reiterate, is not that “metanarratives” do not / cannot exist (since they

plainly do and, it could be argued, their continued existence can be taken as evidence of post-modern social developments).

Rather, the argument is that such metanarratives are, fundamentally (to coin a phrase) misconceived. That is, a belief in the power, vitality and validity of beliefs based around grand narratives are, goes the post-modern argument, doomed to disappointment.

In many ways we can see some truth in this idea since all of the great "isms" we can identify in their metanarrative form have bloomed only to wither relatively quickly.

If you think about the Iranian revolution, for example, after 20-odd years of a particular version of Islamic fundamentalism, changes are starting to appear- a move towards democratic forms of election, the easing of restrictions placed on male and female behaviour etc.

What we are seeing in this situation is what we see in every human society where gross social inequalities are imposed from above (through political / military / religious dictatorship) – for a time social order can be maintained through force or arms but, in the long run force alone cannot prevent social change.

For post-modernists, therefore, the question of metanarrative beliefs develops from the theoretical critique of the concept itself; that is, the argument that metanarratives cannot be sustained, either ideologically, politically or, in point of fact.

Post-modernism and Science...

Post-modernism has, unfairly perhaps, been characterised in some quarters as being "anti-science". This in itself is significant (or even ironic) because it relates to the way post-modern writers have questioned some of the taken for granted assumptions of Big Science. Where this critique has taken place, the response has been, somewhat ironically, to use the position and authority of Big Science as a means of attacking – rather than confronting and exposing – its methodological critics. Thus, post-modernist theory is caricatured as "anti science" for two basic reasons:

Firstly, to use this type of formulation serves to reinforce the status of Science. Just as in Christian theology the Devil is characterised as the "Anti-Christ" – the antithesis of everything for which Jesus Christ stands (an ideological device that serves at one and the same time to crystallise the basic theology of Christianity and counter-pose "good" against its opposite "evil"), in the modern scientific canon anything that is "not science" is automatically "anti-science".

Post-modern theory is not anti-science, as such, but "anti" what post-modernists' claim to be a particular, partial and ideological conception of "science". The post-modern attack, therefore, is not against the possibility of "scientific knowledge"; rather, it is against the idea that any one belief system can legitimately lay claim to "The Truth" (note how the critique of metanarrative fits here). Post-modernism also questions the claim, implicit in Western scientific belief, that there is only one legitimate way of "doing science"...

Secondly, post-modernists argue that science is an ideological practice – it is just one more story vying for our attention and belief. The claim to truth, for example, that is the touchstone of modern science is, somewhat ironically, refuted by science's own admissions about its limitations.

Interactionist criticisms of “science” focus on discrepancy between ideology of scientific method and reality (Kaplan, etc. include Scientific Ethos and criticisms of Merton). If this is so, post-modern claims about science being an ideological form of knowledge, fundamentally based on subjective interpretations, formulations, protections etc. are shown to have some substantive basis.

The Scientific Ethos: Genetically-Modified Food; An Example

In Britain, the widespread condemnation of genetically-modified food and the destruction (by “environmental activists”) of GM test sites seems, on the face of things, to be a Luddite reaction to “scientific progress” – a clear case of “science” on the one hand being opposed by the forces of superstition on the other. However, on closer inspection this simple dichotomy is not so clear-cut, since environmental action seems to have followed a demand for scientific debate about the nature of genetically-modified food. Direct action, as it were, seems to have been the last resort in a process whereby “scientific debate” was not engaged, but rather ignored. The science behind genetic modification appears to have been driven by the profit motive rather than the pursuit of “knowledge” since it is evident that the pursuit of knowledge “for its own sake” was not a factor in the equation...

In some sense, therefore, the environmental activists who destroyed gm crops were pursuing a purer view of science than that put forward by the array of scientists employed by the GM industry, mainly because the former were concerned to take the wider view of the relationship between one type of activity (changing the genetic structure of plants) and the consequences of that activity (possible changes to the environment)

Plausibility:

Post-modernism is not, in one respect, very different from modern science – especially the type of realist science that has by and large replaced positivist paradigms. Note how both state the limits of knowledge – Popper, for example, argues that best we can ever claim about knowledge is that it’s not false – not that it’s true.

We come back to concept of plausibility in a number of ways:

Subjectively, we can argue that science is more plausible as an explanation of something. We do not claim it is “true”, just more plausible (standard Interactionist stuff – Berger and Luckmann etc.).

Similarly, when we think about concepts of reality it is clear we, as individuals, apply this concept to our own perceptions and experiences. In some instance, where we have personal knowledge of an event, we may assign a higher level of plausibility to this personal experience than to descriptions of the event produced in the mass media (a description filtered through a whole range of individual / group interpretations).

Thus, in a situation where we rely totally on the media for information / explanation / interpretation we apply higher and lower levels of plausibility to different media based on our knowledge and understanding of their background.

E.g. In numerous surveys, the BBC is trusted to be “more impartial” than The Sun. This doesn’t mean that we treat the output of the BBC as totally impartial, “the truth” etc. Rather we understand the important ideological differences between a largely autonomous news agency that doesn’t have a specific ideological axe to grind (links

into idea of general values and their support) and a private newspaper that has a clear and unequivocal ideological background.

Key Problem:

An obvious and fairly central problem to the post-modern enterprise is the status of knowledge in a situation where moral relativism is, in an ironic way, elevated to the status of a truism.

If there can be no such idea as an objective truth, it follows that all forms of knowledge, because they are socially constructed and therefore shot-through with subjective assumptions and interpretations, are equally valid or invalid.

This produces a number of problems:

Firstly, sociological knowledge is, in this respect, no more valid than the gurgling of a baby.

Secondly, objective scientific knowledge has the same status as subjective non-scientific knowledge.

Finally, the arguments of post-modernist writers, as **Habermas** has noted, are no more valid than those of the writers whose arguments they claim we should reject. In an ironic twist, post-modernism, in the attempt to refute all past theories of social life as “metanarratives” end up creating a metanarrative of their own, albeit one that denies the validity of metanarratives...

However, if you look at post-modernism from the point-of-view of plausibility, the picture becomes a little less confused, since it is possible to use this concept to square all circles.

The problem, however, remains one of how to assess the status of plausibility itself, since it is not logically possible to measure something that is itself the measure of, in effect, everything (since the thing we use to “measure the measure” would, logically, make this process invalid...

E.g. how do you measure length? With a ruler. How do you measure a ruler?

E.g. That line is 12 inches long. How do you know this? You measure it with a ruler. How do you know the length of the ruler? You make an initial arbitrary decision to say “this represents 12 inches”...