



Theory and Methods

Teachers Notes

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About the Video

This video is designed to support teaching and understanding of the links between theory and method in sociology. It is intended to illustrate textbook reading and lead to classroom discussion and student exercises.

It is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on a key area of sociological thought. The end of each section is indicated by a pause. We recommend that, initially, the video is shown in separate sections over time.

- **Origins of Sociology: Classical Sociology**
- **Positivism**
- **Interpretivism**
- **Realism**

As the relationship between theory and method is one of the areas that many students find difficult to understand and easy to confuse, it might be useful first to separate out different levels of theoretical debate in sociology on the lines indicated below:

Levels of debate in Social Theory

1. Theoretical debates about sources of knowledge in sociology (epistemological questions)
2. Differences between theoretical perspectives on human societies (e.g. structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism etc.)
3. Debates about specific, or substantive sociological theories (e.g. Weber's theory of the role of religion in the development of modern, rational capitalism)

The key theme of this video is that it is **theories of knowledge** in sociology which have the most important influence on methodology, the questions that sociologists ask and the process of interpreting data.

In each section, abstract, or theoretical ideas about what counts as valid knowledge in sociology are related to specific research examples. This guide will outline the key themes of each section and make some suggestions on student exercises and some of the questions that can be asked before and after each section.

This is not an introduction to sociology and will be most effectively used with students who have some understanding of sociology. While every attempt has been made to keep language as clear as possible, there will inevitably be terms that some students find difficult. A **glossary** of some of the more complex terms has been provided at the back of this guide.

1.Origins and Classical Sociology

Key Issues

This section is designed to help students understand:

- The central role of theory in sociology and the importance of **linking** theoretical ideas to methodology
- the origins of sociology and a belief that a scientific method would reveal **laws** of social order and social change
- the distinction between **conflict** and **consensus** models of society
- the distinction between **holistic** theories, like those of Comte and Marx, which attempt to explain the totality of societies and **atomistic** theories which attempt to understand societies by breaking them down into component parts.

Before watching this section

- ➔ Ask students to write down what they feel are the major differences between a sociologist's and a lay person's understanding of society.
Can students explain why sociological knowledge is claimed to be 'better' or more 'valid' than common sense.
- ➔ How do we know something is true?
Can our ideas of what is, or what is not true, be applied to the study of society?
If so, how?

Questions after watching this section

- ➔ Why is theory important in sociology?
- ➔ What are some of the main characteristics of 'classical sociology'?
- ➔ This video suggests that classical sociologists used 'science' to justify their favoured political viewpoint. Much the same could be said about some sociologists today. For example, some marxists and feminists have very clear political agendas in their research.
Does this invalidate or compromise their sociological findings?
Should sociology try to be neutral?

Exercises

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The Desert Island Game

Here the emphasis would be on developing awareness of the problem of social order and how this is determined and maintained. Divide the students into groups and explain;

'you are marooned on a desert island where the only form of food available is a species of nocturnal rabbit, How will you organise yourselves to survive?'

Groups tend to volunteer different types of societies, some based on conflict, others, more on co-operation. Hierarchies may develop, or aspirations to communal living. An introduction to analysing the nature of society may help students to understand the concerns of the classical sociologists.

For a further exercise in skills building, ask students to **evaluate** the stability of the societies they have produced.

(Adapted from P. McNeill & C. Townley, (1986), *'Fundamentals of Sociology'* Hutchinson, pp 33)

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Conflict and Consensus in schools

Divide the students into two groups. Choose a school setting such as a lesson or a lunch break. Ask one group to analyse the situation in terms of harmony, co-operation and common values and interests of the staff and students concerned. The second group is to analyse the same situation in terms of the power, authority and control that certain groups have over others in that setting. Such an exercise can illustrate how the same situation can be seen in different ways and how the preconceived political orientation of the observer can influence the selection of the material.

Here, skills of **interpretation** and **application** are required.

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Exercise on holism v atomism

Ask the students to write down 10-20 words describing a familiar object or situation, (e.g. themselves, the school, a television programme). The students are then to analyse the list, determining whether the word applies to the 'whole' ('attractive', 'boring') or to parts ('blue eyes', 'good music')

Here students are using their own experience of how they assess situations, in order to gain **knowledge** and **understanding** of the distinction being made.

'Conflict' and 'Consensus' Models of Order

Theory	What is the Source of Social Order?	How is Social Order characterised?	How do we explain culture and shared values?	How do societies change?
Consensus (e.g. Parsons)	Co-operation and Mutual Interest	Organic (like a human body)	Common Experience and Interest	Process of Evolution
Conflict (e.g. Marx)	Power and Control	Dichotomous (Split between two groups)	Hegemony (Ideas of dominant group transmitted through society)	Revolution

References:

Most textbooks cover the scope and origins of sociology well. However, teachers may also find the following very useful:

M. Slattery, (1991) *'Key Ideas in Sociology'*, Nelson, is an excellent collection of short chapters on influential sociologists and some of their key ideas, including 'Comte and positivism' and 'Marx and alienation'.

D. Layder (1994) 'Some Misunderstandings about Social Theory', *Sociology Review* Vol. 3 No. 3, pp 17-20. In this article Dr Layder expands on some of the points he makes in the video about what social theory is, and its central relevance to all sociological work.

H. Chignell, (1996), *'Theory and Method'*, Connect Publications. A very useful collection of photocopyable material on sociological perspectives, research methods and sociology and science. Consensus and conflict theories are covered on pp 7-11.

Social Studies Review, Nov. 1988, pp 78-80 is a useful 'Question and Answer' article where a student attempts the question: 'How is sociology different from common sense? The answer is followed by an examiner's comment.

2. Positivism

Key Issues

This section is designed to help students understand

- the positivist idea that the principles of **science** can be applied to the study of **people**
- the **key principles of positivism** with reference to a student research example
- the use of the **survey method** in sociology
- the issue of **meaning** and the questions it raises about the survey method

Before watching this section, ask the students

- How do sociologists validate, or substantiate their ideas?
- How can sociologists try to quantify the results of their work?

Questions after watching this section

- What is meant by positivism in sociology?
- Can you identify some of the limitations of the survey method?
- In the video Dr Pawson looks at a problem with the survey method based on the issue of meaning. He argues that 'different people may understand different things by the same question, so one person's 'strongly agree' isn't the same as another person's 'strongly agree'.

But does this necessarily invalidate the survey method? Can you think of ways in which a survey researcher might try to get round this problem?

Exercises

* **Research Requirements**

Ask students to discuss **what** they consider are the qualities needed in a good research project. It is likely there will be a variety of responses, but qualities associated with positivism, such as trying to be unbiased and, others being able to test the researcher's **findings**, will undoubtedly feature. The exercise is intended to draw out some of the values associated with positivism.

Skills of **interpretation** and **application** are needed here.

This may help to highlight the **paradox** that although positivism is widely criticised in the textbooks, positivist ideas still underpin much contemporary sociological research.

In the video Tony Lawson makes the point that in answering questions on Theory and Method, it is important 'to avoid crude stereotypes...with usually positivists as all fools and interpretivists as the heroes'. However this is difficult for the students as this is the line taken by many of the textbooks.

* **Variation of Meanings**

Students are either given a survey sheet or a list of typical survey answers such as 'satisfied', 'agree', 'improved', 'worsened' etc. They are asked to define what they understand by these terms.

Discuss the implications of variations of meanings for the research process.

Note: There is a 'Question and Answer' special on Questionnaire Design in *Sociology Review*, Vol. 4 No. 2, (pp 25-26) which could be used with this exercise.

* **Survey/Interview**

Divide the class into three groups. The first group have the task of designing a formal interview schedule to **evaluate** sixth form students' perceptions of teachers' performances. The second group are the respondents. The third group are to re-interview the respondents in an informal setting with open-ended questions.

The students then compare their findings. The purpose of the exercise is to increase awareness of some of the limitations of the survey method.

Skills of **interpretation** in analysing and interpreting the results of the survey are developed here. Students also need to **evaluate** their own research in determining whether this has produced valid knowledge.

References

Students may well find the following helpful:

Tony Lawson (1988) 'In the Shadow of Science' *Social Studies Review*. Nov. '88, pp 36-41.

Hugh Chignell (1996), '*Theory and Method*', Connect pp 33-36.

G. Marshall (1995), '*In Praise of Sociology*', Routledge. In this book, Professor Marshall provides a precis of ten classical studies in British sociology, any of which could provide an empirical basis for discussion of Theory and Method. In relation to points raised in this section of the video, it is significant that a number of those classical studies, such as Goldthorpe on social mobility, Townsend on poverty and Brown on the social basis of depression, adopt a broadly positivist approach.

Teachers may find rather better accounts of Theory and Method than are found in conventional textbooks in:

N. Gilbert ed.(1993), '*Researching Social Life*', Sage. Chapters 1-2.

T. May (1993), '*Social Research*', Open University. Chapter 2.

J. Hughes (1990), '*The Philosophy of Social Research*', Longman. Chapters 2-4.

3. Interpretivism

Key Issues

This section is designed to give students some understanding of:

- the basis of the interpretivist **critique of positivism**
- the characteristics of the **interpretivist interview**
- the ideas of **social causation** and **social construction** compared with reference to the case study example of suicide
- the questioning of the idea of the sociologist as **neutral observer**

Before watching this section, ask the students

- ➔ Should sociology follow the scientific method?
- ➔ Can sociologists be neutral observers of life?
Should they try to be neutral observers?
- ➔ In the video we use the case study example of suicide to compare ideas of social causation and social construction. Suicide is a familiar example in sociology and included in many texts, but if students have not covered this topic, it may be better to give them some basic material on the key ideas of the sociology of suicide first. See, for example:

M. Haralambos and M. Holborn (1995), *'Sociology: Themes and Perspectives'*, 4th edition, Collins. pp 817-826.

S. Taylor (1990), 'Beyond Durkheim: Sociology and Suicide', *Social Studies Review* Nov. '90. pp 70-74.

Questions after watching this section

- ➔ Why do some sociologists argue that sociology can never be 'objective'?
- ➔ What is the imposition problem?
How does this issue apply to
a) positivist approaches and b) interpretivist approaches.
- ➔ What do sociologists mean when they say that something is 'socially constructed'?
- ➔ In the video it is suggested that sociologists are rarely surprised and usually end up 'discovering exactly what they have been looking for'.
Is this a fair criticism of sociology?

Can you think of sociological studies where researchers have been surprised by their findings?

Exercises

- **Social Construction Exercise**

Students are to write down what they consider to be the common characteristics of a group of people e.g. old people, students, politicians, Rastafarians, lone parents.

Compare the lists. Ask where these ideas of common characteristics come from?

Alternatively, show students pictures of certain distinctive looking people e.g. businessman, clergyman, homeless person. Ask students to describe some of the characteristics of the people they are looking at. To what extent is our 'understanding' of people based on common sense knowledge?

This discussion aims to illustrate how, to some extent the organisation and values of our society shape how we 'see' the world. This can then lead into a discussion of the idea of 'social construction'.

Knowledge and **application** skills are developed by this activity.

Observational study

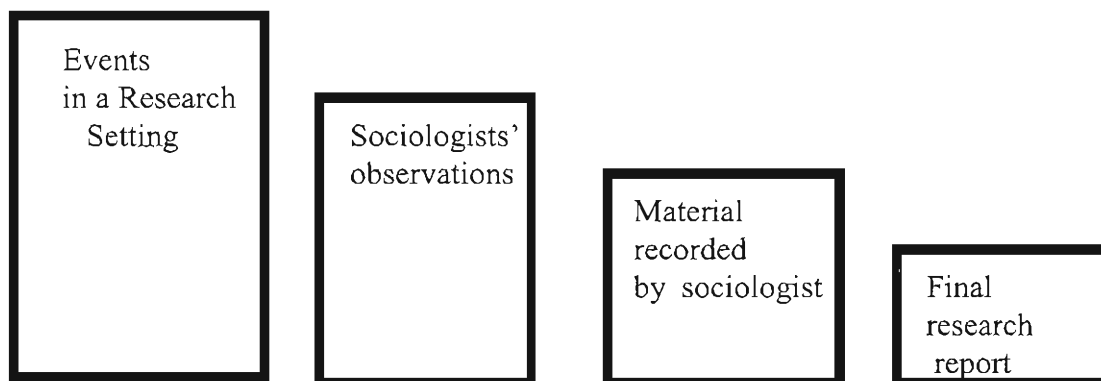
Ask students to undertake a short observational study in the educational environment, such as a lesson or break time. Choose a focus for their attention, such as, friendship behaviour or staff-student interaction, and ask students to write a descriptive account of their observations. From this description, students are requested to write down what they feel are the three key points of their observations.

Alternatively, give students a magazine or a newspaper article to read. Ask them to imagine they are researching this story, or situation, as sociologists. Ask them to list the key points they would include in their report.

The aim of the exercise is to demonstrate the idea of selection in writing a research report.

The following could be used to illustrate the selection point to students:

Selection in Social Research



- **Analysis of previous studies**

Give students an extract of a piece of sociological research based exclusively, or primarily, on open-ended interviews. e.g. Whyte on street corner society, Oakley on Motherhood, Atkinson on coroners. Taking into account the comments in the video made by Dr Pawson on 'imposition by selection' and the discussions of the interpretivist research group, ask the students to comment on how the authors of the pieces they are considering use extracts of interviews to support the general points they are making.

Sociological textbooks tend to be very sceptical of studies based on official statistics, but much more accepting of research based on face to face open interviews..

Why is this? Is it justified?

- **Simulation of a Coroner's Court**

Divide the class into groups of three and give them the following examples of cases to come before a Coroner's Court. Ask them to arrive at a conclusion as to the cause of death.

Alternatively, this exercise could be developed as a role play, where students take the roles of e.g. relative of the deceased, doctor, coroner etc.

Case 1. Tom, a 37 year old working man, died as a result of injuries received when he fell under a train. Further investigations revealed that he was married with two children, and apparently, in good health. He was in full-time employment. There was no evidence that Tom was depressed. Witnesses said he was 'quite cheerful' and none of them could suggest any reason why he should want to end his life.

Case 2. Bill, a 35 year old unemployed men, died as a result of injuries received when he fell under a train. Investigations revealed that Bill had been living alone since his marriage had broken up two years before. He had not been in work for several years. Recently, he had been receiving medical treatment for alcohol dependence and for depression. For the past few weeks he had been failing to keep his appointments. Acquaintances said Bill had been

very upset and depressed when an attempted reconciliation with his wife had failed.

(Adapted from S. Taylor (1988), '*Suicide*', Longman .)

The aim of this exercise is to illustrate how certain common sense ideas about peoples' life situation can be used to infer, or contradict, suicidal intent. Students are asked to discuss the implications for suicide statistics and consider how many other examples of official statistics they are able to suggest, which are broadly affected by the same social processes.

References

Interpretivism is well covered by the introductory texts but the following may also prove useful:

H. Chignell, '*Theory and Methods.*' pp 37-42.

M. Hammersley (1992), '*Introducing Ethnography*', *Sociology Review*' Vol. 3 No 2. pp 18-23.

Sociology Review (1994) Vol. 3 No. 4. pp 21-23. A 'Research Roundup' article where a researcher examines an open-ended interview in detail.

R. Burgess ed (1989), '*Investigating Society*', Longman. A collection of accounts by sociologists of some of the processes, techniques and problems involved in undertaking a research study.

G. Marshall, '*In Praise of Sociology*'. Contains accounts of several classical ethnographic studies, including Stan Cohen on Mods and Rockers and Roy Wallis on Scientology.

4. Realism

Key Issues

This section helps to explain

- the basis of **realist theory**
- how realism **compares** to classical, positivist and interpretivist theories
- the central role of **theory** in realist research
- the **realist view of science** and its implications for sociological research

Before watching this section

- ➔ The realist approach is comparatively new on introductory sociology courses and some preliminary reading may be helpful. See, for example:

J. Clarke & D. Layder (1994), ‘Let’s Get Real’: The Realist Approach in Sociology’. *Sociology Review* Vol. 4 No. 2. pp 6-9.

P. Taylor et. al. (1995), *‘Sociology in Focus’* Causeway Press. pp 638-639.

- ➔ It might be useful to explain to students that, although there is a ‘new realist movement’ in sociology, realist ideas have a long history in the subject. For example, there are realist elements in the work of Marx and Durkheim because both used theoretical analysis to try to reveal the underlying, but hidden, causes of observable patterns of order and change in society.

Questions after watching this section

- ➔ In what ways does realism offer an alternative to positivism and interpretivism?
- ➔ If sociologists’ observations cannot be separated from their theories, does this mean that sociology cannot be a science?
- ➔ In the video Dr Pawson suggests that the point of research in sociology is to help choose between competing theories. Do you find this a valid approach? He also argues against sociologists simply pursuing their own case. Do you agree?

Exercises

- * Pick a topic, such as why most of the top jobs in the country are occupied by men. Ask students to compile a list of theories that might explain this observation.
The task then is to devise a research methodology that might allow comparison between at least two of the theories.
- * Ask students to compare positivist, interpretivist and realist approaches to suicide.

Some of the references already mentioned will help **students** with this exercise.

J. Clarke and D. Layder, 'Let's get real'....*Sociology Review*.

M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, '*Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*'. pp 817-826.

S. Taylor, '*Beyond Durkheim, Sociology and Suicide*' .

J. Hood-Williams, (1994), 'Suicide and Emile Durkheim', *Social Science Teacher*, Autumn '94, pp 12-14.

Further References

Teachers who may want to go beyond textbook representations of realism are recommended the following:

R. Bhaskar (1989), '*The Possibility of Naturalism*', Harvester.

W. Outhwaite (1990), 'Realism, Naturalism and Social Behaviour', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* , Vol. 20. No 4.

D. Layder (1993), '*New Strategies in Social Research*', Polity.

R. Pawson (1989), '*A Measure for Measures*', Routledge.

R. Pawson (1996), 'Theorising the Interview', *British Journal of Sociology*' Vol. 47. No 2. pp 245-314.

Answering questions on Theory and Method

Questions

In the video Tony Lawson offers some advice about tackling Theory and Method questions.

Do you agree with his answers?

In what ways could Tony Lawson's answers affect the way in which you prepare for, and answer, examination questions?

Further reading for **students**:

M. Moores and T. Breslin (1991), 'In Search of Good Sociology', *Sociology Review*, Vol. 1. No 1. In this article the authors ask Chief Examiners what knowledge and skills students should attempt to develop in order to write good answers to sociology questions.

Sociology Review, Vol 4. No 2.. A 'Question and Answer' article on helping students to write better sociology essays.

Glossary

Section 1.

Objectivity: Knowledge which is free from bias, opinion or prejudice is called objective. The goal of science is said to be the production of objective knowledge. There are divisions of opinion amongst sociologists about the extent to which sociology is capable of producing objective understanding of social life.

Conflict Model: Conflict theorists take the view that all human societies are divided into groups which are in competition with each other over scarce resources, power and opportunity. They argue that the social order people see around them is the result of the power and control some groups hold over others. Marxists, for example, argue that there is always a conflict of interest in societies between those who own the means of producing wealth (ruling class) and those who have only their labour power to sell (subordinate classes). Feminist sociologists also tend to see societies in terms of a conflict of interest between men and women.

Consensus Model: Consensus theorists argue that the values and common interests people have, form the basis of order in any society. Comte and Durkheim tended to take this view. Another consensus theorist was Parsons. In his 'structural functionalist' approach, social stability is seen as a 'normal' condition of society, whilst conflict is seen as 'pathological', rather like a disease in a part of the body. Consensus theorists do not ignore power and control, but they see them as general resources in society, necessarily exercised by some, for example, police, governments, teachers, but for the benefit of society as a whole.

Holistic: This is the idea, adopted by many classical sociologists, that societies should be seen and studied as whole systems. Sociological research should start by looking at large scale organisations and their relationship to each other rather than the experiences of individuals. Today, most sociologists study only aspects, or parts, of societies. However, with the increasing interdependence of societies and the development of global communications more sociologists are becoming interested in holistic theories to explain global culture.

Correlation: This simply means that two or more things are related to each other in some way. For example, statistics suggest that more men than women commit suicide. There is thus a positive correlation between male gender and suicide and a negative correlation between female gender and suicide.

Section 2:

Phenomena: This is just a complicated word sociologists use to mean things or, more specifically, things which can be perceived, or seen.

Hypothesis: This means an idea or a theory which has been developed in such a way that it can be tested with relevant evidence.

Data: In sociology this is usually taken to mean the information gained by doing research.

Bias: This means that information which has been collected, or is being used, by the researcher has been distorted by some error in the collection procedure, or by the prejudice and preference of the person collecting it.

Replicability: This means that it is possible for other researchers to repeat the research and test the results. In sociology, quantitative research is usually easier to replicate than qualitative research.

Materialist: In sociology the term materialist describes theories which argue that economic factors, such as technology and the organisation of work, shape the rest of society.

Culture: Sociologists use the term culture to describe the ideas, customs and values of a society or a social group.

Section 3:

Social integration: This describes the way in which people are tied, or bonded, to each other through the joint membership of social institutions, such as the family, work and religious organisations. It was used most famously by Durkheim in his study of suicide, where he argued that the more people were integrated into social institutions, the less vulnerable they were to suicide. However, it has been used widely and developed in modern sociology, and there is now evidence to suggest that levels of integration have a profound effect on people's mental and physical health.

Social causation: The idea of social causation suggests that one aspect of society, or social behaviour, influences another. For example, in the video, Sujata Ray suggests that increasing use of drugs and alcohol amongst young men may contribute to their rising suicide rate.

Social construction: Emphasis on the idea of social construction is usually associated with interpretivist sociology and, in particular, scepticism of the idea of a 'scientific' sociology. It is argued that the values and practices of a society, and groups within a society, shape how its members come to 'see' the world and define things. As these values and ideas change over time, and vary between different groups within a society, there is no clear cut and unchanging definition of the things the sociologist wants to study. For example, at one time smacking was generally seen as a perfectly acceptable way of controlling a child's behaviour. Now this is much more questionable, with some groups and societies defining smacking children as 'abusive' and even illegal. Thus 'crimes', cases of 'mental illness', 'child abuse', 'suicide' and so on are not simply self evident 'facts' waiting to be recognised by officials and explained by sociologists, they are socially constructed. That is, their meaning is given by the way in which they are interpreted in a given social context. From this point of view, rather than try to explain why something like suicide happens, the task of the sociologist is to see how particular deaths come to be defined as 'suicide'.

Imposing a frame of reference: When sociologists use the survey method they have to write the questions and the range of answers in advance. They are then limiting the scope of their respondents' answers. It is the sociologist who defines the 'rules of the interview'.

Section 4:

Variable: In simple terms variables are things which are being measured, or tested, in a piece of research. For example, 'isolation' and 'urban living' are variables which might be correlated with suicide.

Micro-society: This is a term indicating social research which is at the level of face to face interaction, or behaviour in small groups, and is usually associated with qualitative research methods.

Underlying causes: Most sociological research focuses on the relationship between things which are apparent, or observable, such as the relationship between 'bad housing' and 'crime'. However, realists argue that one of the tasks of sociology is to reveal the hidden but real causes of what we observe. In his 'realist' study of suicide Durkheim drew attention to the relationship between religion and suicide. Protestants had higher suicide rates than Catholics. However, he did not argue that Protestantism was a 'cause' of suicide. Rather he suggested that the hidden, underlying, cause was social integration {see above}. Catholicism was more integrating than Protestantism.

