

The AQA specification:

- The relationship between sociology and social policy.

The exam requires you are able to:

- ▶ Describe the relationship between sociology and social policy.
- ▶ Evaluate the relationship between sociology and social policy.

Social problems and sociological problems

This exam notes look at how sociology is related to social policy. Before we examine the relationship, it is worth understanding the distinction between sociological problems and social problems: Peter Worsely (1977), was the first to offer this distinction:

- **Social problem** – refers to “some piece of behaviour that causes public friction and/or private misery and calls for collective action to solve it”. For example, crime, anti-social behaviour, gang culture, poverty, truancy, the poor educational performance of inner city schools, etc.
- **Sociological problem** – is a feature of social life that requires an explanation, e.g. the decline of church attendance. Some sociological problems are not seen as a problem in social life. For example, a sociological researcher may conduct a study to “investigate the difference in female and male social manners in public places”.

The two overlap: a sociological problem may be also a social problem. This is because many sociologists often focus on social problems (e.g. poverty, and crime) by carrying out research with the aim of it providing a sociological explanation and possible solutions and strategies to deal with or minimise the issue.

- **Social policy** refers to the strategies or action plan set out by the governments to deal with the welfare of the people (e.g. housing, and health, etc) as well as the social problems in society. Government departments (e.g. the Department of Education) employ sociologists or rely on academic sociological research to help them inform and implement policies to tackle social problems by having a direct input into policy-making.

The influence of sociology on policy

The influence sociology will have on social policy is determined by many factors. Even when sociologists conduct research into social problems, there are no guarantees government policy-makers will act upon their findings. Below are some of the factors determining whether or not sociological research will influence social policy:

- **Electoral popularity.** Governments are motivated to attract voters and are therefore likely to be influenced by opinion polls and focus groups used to research public attitudes. For example, David Cameron’s 2015 election campaign promise to give voters a referendum as to whether Britain should remain as a member of the European Union – a policy that was favoured by the public. Equally, sociological research findings may require a social policy that will be unpopular with voters, with the result a government is, therefore, less likely to implement it.
- **Financial constraints.** Sociological research findings suggesting appropriate social policies should be put in place could be too costly to implement. For example, eliminating poverty by increasing welfare benefits is unlikely as financial constraints mean there is insufficient government funding to do this in a feasible way.
- **Interest groups.** The implementation of some policies will meet with too much opposition from pressure groups such as large businesses and pharmaceutical companies seeking to protect their interests. For example, cigarette companies have been very effective in protecting their interests.

- **The researcher's own ideological beliefs.** The sociologist's own ideological views can have an effect on social policy. If the researcher's own political beliefs are similar to those of the government, they have more chance to influence policy. Critical sociologists, such as Marxists who are critical of the state, are very unlikely to have an influence on social policy as their views are too extreme or hostile. Different governments (Conservative, Labour, etc) may prefer certain sociologists than others – it all depends on whether they fit in with the government's ideology. Therefore, sociologists tend to have different degrees of influence at different times, depending on who is in power.
- **Globalisation.** The effect of globalisation can mean the power of particular governments can be limited. For example, international organisations such as the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) may influence the social policies of individual governments; by way of illustration, a government required to follow certain immigration policies laid down by the European Union.

Perspectives on social policy and sociology

Different sociological perspectives have different views on the role sociology should have in relation to social policy.

Functionalism

- Early Functionalists such as Comte and Durkheim believed the social world can be studied using scientific methods, namely positivism (analysing statistics data). Durkheim believed the role of the sociologist is to provide the state with objective, scientific information on which it can base its policies, although they, themselves, did not recommend exactly what social policies should be implemented. However, Durkheim did advocate social policies that help increase the amount of social solidarity for the good of all. For example, Durkheim advocated the abolition of inherited wealth to make society meritocratic. Later, Functionalists such as Parsons advocated policies supporting the nuclear family.
- Generally speaking, functionalism was a theoretical approach, identifying and explaining the causes of social problems rather than providing practical social policies. However, functionalists see society as based on value consensus and therefore favour policies bringing about social cohesion in society, such as promoting policies for the reduction of crime and suicide rates, and housing policies to encourage the nuclear family, etc.
- Functionalists favour policies sometimes referred to as 'piecemeal social engineering' – bit-by-bit change rather than a complete major change.

New Right theorists

- The New Right has been more influential on social policies than is the case with functionalism. They hold political viewpoints to the right; that is, they hold more traditional and conservative social values, e.g. they disapprove of single-parent families and support the traditional nuclear family. The New Right are often opposed to sociologists making social policy recommendations as they believe the state should have minimal involvement with social problems. The New Right see the role of sociologists as being to propose policies promoting individual responsibility and choice. For example, Charles Murray (1984), maintains providing generous welfare as a social policy solution for poverty will make the problem worse. This is because he believes it creates a dangerous underclass who become dependent on a welfare-dependency culture.
- The New Right believe the social policy of the government should be directed towards, and supportive of, the traditional values of society, such as policies encouraging the traditional nuclear family and the discouraging of single-parent families. In terms of crime, they advocate a strong 'law and order' approach underpinned by 'zero tolerance' policies. The New Right has had a far greater effect on the policies of the UK government than any other perspective since the 1980s, influencing both the Conservative and Labour governments between 1997-2010.

The social democratic perspective

- The social democratic perspective is associated with liberal political ideology and therefore has a strong influence on left-of-centre governments such as with the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s in the UK (but not so much so with more recent labour governments between 1997-2010).
- Social democrats believe sociologists should be, and are, actively involved in making social policy recommendations. They believe their recommendations can help eradicate the social problems they identify. The social democratic perspective favours helping to reduce the social inequality in society brought about by capitalism; it favours social policies targeting the major redistribution of wealth and income from the rich to the poor.
- Peter Townsend's (1979) research on poverty led him to identify the extent and causes of poverty in the UK based on surveys of over 2000 households. He used the findings to put forward recommendations for policies such as more progressive taxation to fund increased welfare for the poor like higher benefit levels. The Black Report (1980) identified a range of cultural and structural causes (capitalism) of inequalities in health. The Black Report argued strongly for structural and material solutions to reduce the health divide – in fact, the report made 37 policy recommendations for reducing these inequalities (e.g. free school meals to poor families).

Marxism

Marxists argue social policies serve the interests of the ruling class – those who own the means of production rather than society as a whole. They argue social policies appear to benefit most of the population in society, but in reality do not. Marxists state social policies are there to continue the exploitation of working-class people. Such policies do this by:

- **Social policies provide ideological legitimisation for capitalism.** Some policies appear to disguise exploitation by capitalism. For example, the existence of welfare state policies appears to show the capitalist system cares for the poor and the sick, although the welfare system does little to redistribute money from the rich to the poor.
- **Social policies help maintain the labour force.** The NHS really serves the interests of capitalism and not working-class people, because the NHS helps keep workers healthy and fit, which is ideal for capitalists to continue their exploitation of workers.
- **Preventing a working-class revolution.** Policies are designed to make token concessions to the working-class to prevent a working-class revolution. Some social policies are implemented to give concessions to the working-class, such as the creation of welfare policies as a mechanism of 'containment'. This prevents the working class from realising they are being exploited, which might otherwise lead to greater unity and the development of a working-class consciousness, which could cause conflict and instability for the capitalist class.

According to Marxists, the role of the sociologist is to criticise social policies serving the interests of the rich and powerful, to challenge the social inequality, exploitation and oppression capitalism produces, and the social policies which often disadvantage the working class.

Feminism

Feminists see society as patriarchal – that is, male-dominated and benefiting men at the expense of women. Therefore, they see government social policies as perpetuating women's subordination. Feminists generally believe social policies should reflect gender equality; however, different branches of feminism hold different views which ultimately affects the type of social policies that should be implemented.

- Liberal feminists advocate for more equal rights between the genders and believe this can be achieved by a gradual change in society to create more equal opportunities. Liberal feminists have been influential on several policies. For example, liberal feminists played a part in changing legislation regarding rape in the family (e.g. rape within marriage being made illegal in 1991). They also played a role in changing policies against gender inequality. For example, laws were introduced in the 1970s, including the Equal Pay Act (1970), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the

Employment Protection Act (1975), which made maternity leave a statutory right.

Radical feminists take a harder line on patriarchy and advocate for female supremacy over their lives – full control without the influence or control of men. For example, they are pushing for policies advocating for separatism in which men and women live apart (separated) to free women totally from patriarchy. The extreme views of radical feminists have had little impact on social policies and mainstream governments. However, their public campaign to have domestic and sexual violence against women highlighted has led to some improvements in the policing of crimes against women.

✓X Evaluation

✓ **Functionalism ignores structural inequalities**

The functionalist view on social policy has been criticised by Marxists because it does not deal with the root of the problem. For example, Marxists argue policies aimed at improving the equal opportunity of different classes in education does not work very well (working-class children do less well academically). This is because such policies ignore the wider structural issues of poverty (material deprivation). They argue the basic structure of society needs to be changed to deal with some of the social problems in society.

✓ **Social democratic policies are ignored by the state**

Sociologists who hold a left ideological belief, such as adopting a social democratic perspective, is a good example to demonstrate how social policy recommendations are not always listened to by those in government. For example, the Conservative government not only ruled out implementing the Black Report's recommendations (commissioned by the Labour government) on the grounds of cost but also restricted the publication of what was seen to be a politically embarrassing report.

X **The social democratic perspective is criticised by Marxists**

Postmodernism has been criticised for being self-contradictory. Postmodernism may claim we should no longer accept metanarratives as being absolute truths, which means we cannot accept the postmodernist view either, as it is another metanarrative attempting to explain the world.

X **Marxist views are unrealistic**

Marxist views of social policy have been criticised because they have no real influence on social policies in the UK as they are seen to be too extreme, making it unrealistic to implement them in real life. Even the political influence of Marxism has dwindled greatly in many communist countries in Eastern Europe, and in Russia (formerly known as the Soviet Union), demonstrating Marxism lacks appeal.

X **Liberal feminists criticised**

Radical feminists have been critical of liberal feminists, suggesting the reforms and changes of social policy to reduce the sexual discrimination of women are not dealing with the real issues. For example, women continue to be paid less, do more domestic work than men, and are still portrayed as sex objects in the media. Radical feminism argues the structure of society is dominated by a patriarchal system – a structure of power in which men control and exploit women. The solution for the emancipation of women is to abolish the patriarchal society.