

Problems faced by
sociology as a
science and how they
can be alleviated



This essay is aimed at critically discussing the problems faced by sociology as a science and indicating how such problems can be reduced or alleviated. In order to answer the question at hand, the definitions of sociology, science and alleviate will be provided. Then the essay will then turn its attention to the difficulties faced by sociology, there after ways of alleviating the problems will follow and the conclusion will sum up the discussion. Sociology is the scientific study of human social relations or group life. (Encarta Microsoft Student, 2009).

Northrope (1955), defined sociology as a science that studies human societies and social behaviour. According to Giddens (2006), sociology can be defined as the systematic study of human societies, giving special emphasis to modern, industrialized systems. From the above citations, it can be observed that sociology studies human behaviour in society. According to Giddens (2006: 78), Science is the use of systematic methods of empirical investigation, the analysis of data, theoretical thinking and logical assessment of arguments to develop a body of knowledge about a particular subject matter.

Encarta dictionary, (2009) defines science as a systematically organized body of knowledge about a particular subject. It is also defined as an activity that is the object of careful study or that is carried out according to a developed method. According to Gopal, (2003), a science is a body of knowledge about natural world and method of discovering knowledge and social institution organized around. To alleviate according to Encarta dictionary, (2009) is to make something such as pain or hardship more bearable or less severe.

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Problems faced by sociology as a science come in different forms and include the following: According to Giddens (2006: 78), People who are aware that their activities are being scrutinized frequently will not behave in the same way as they normally do. They may consciously or unconsciously portray themselves in a way that differs from their usual attitudes. They may even try to ‘assist’ the researcher by giving the responses they believe the researcher wants.

When it comes to research, sociology depends on humans and it might prove impossible to contact some of those to whom questionnaires are to be sent or those whom the researcher wishes to interview. (Ibid: 80). A business firm or government agency may be unwilling to let the researcher carry out the work planned. Difficulties such as these could potentially bias the result of the study and give the researcher a false interpretation. For example, if the researcher is studying how business corporations have complied with equal opportunities programmes for women, then companies that have not complied might not want to be studied.

The results could be biased as a result (Op. cit) Bias can enter the research process in many ways. For example, if a piece of research is based on surveys of a participant’s views, it may be easy for the researcher to push the discussion in a particular way for example, by asking leading questions that follow the researcher’s particular prejudices. Alternatively, the interviewee may evade a question that for various reasons he doesn’t want to answer. The use of questionnaires with fixed wording can help reduce interview bias, but will not eliminate it. (Cohen, 1968).

Another problem faced by sociologists in research according to Giddens, (2006: 80) is the non-response bias. This occurs when a potential participant in a survey, such as a voluntary questionnaire, decides that she doesn't want to take part. As a general rule, the higher the proportion of non-responses in the sample, the more likely it is that the survey of those who do take part will be biased. Even if every attempt is made to reduce bias in the survey, the observations that sociologists make in carrying out a piece of research are likely to reflect their own cultural assumptions.

This is the observer bias and it can be difficult, or perhaps impossible to eliminate. (Ibid) Sociology as a science faces the problem of the inability to rearrange society completely scientific experimentation. In studying society, usually sociology study's people at all levels but suspends attitudes and morals of people. (Young, 1948) To find out whether a correlation between variables is a casual connection, sociologists use controls. This means some variables have to be held constant in order to look at the effects of others.

An example would be in studying the relationship between maternal deprivation in infancy and serious personality problems in adulthood. This could be done by trying to control or 'screen out' other possible influences that might explain the correlation. This might prove difficult as the child's guardian may object to this experiment being carried out on her child.

Giddens (2006: 84) According to Giddens, (2006), another problem in sociology is identifying causes as there are a large number of possible causes that could be invoked to explain any given correlation.

An example is of how difficult it is to be sure of the causal relations involved in a correlation is given by the long history of studies of smoking and lung cancer. Research has consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between the two. Smokers are more likely to contract cancer than non-smokers, and very heavy smokers are more likely to do so than light smokers. The correlation can also be expressed the other way round. A high proportion of those who have lung cancer are smokers or have smoked for long periods in their past.

There have been so many studies confirming these correlations that it is generally accepted that a causal link is involved, but the exact causal mechanisms are thus far largely unknown. However, it has been proposed that people who are predisposed to get lung cancer are also predisposed to smoke. In this view, it is not smoking that causes lung cancer, but rather some built-in biological disposition to smoking and cancer. (Ibid) Another example is the research on suicide carried out by Emile Durkheim. He found a correlation between rates of suicide and seasons of the year.

In the societies Durkheim studied, levels of suicide increased progressively from January to around June or July. From that time onward, they declined over the remainder of the year. It might be supposed that this demonstrates that temperature or climatic change are casually related to the propensity of individuals to kill themselves. Perhaps as temperatures increase, people become more impulsive. However, the casual relation here has nothing to do with temperature or climate at all. In spring and summer, most people engage in a more intensive social life than they do in winter.

Individuals who are isolated or unhappy tend to experience an intensification of these feelings as the activity level of others rises. Therefore sociologists can wrongly ascribe a cause to an event. Sociology also makes use of Ethnographies which are fieldwork, or first hand studies of people, using participant observation or interviewing. According to Giddens, (2006: 86), the published reminiscences and diaries of fieldworkers have revealed problems like frequent feelings of loneliness which must be coped with as it isn't easy to fit into a social context or community where you don't really belong.

The researcher may be constantly frustrated because the members of the group refuse to talk frankly about themselves; direct queries may be welcomed in some contexts but met with chilly silence in others. Some types of fieldwork may even be physically dangerous; for instance, a researcher studying a delinquent gang might be seen as a police informer or might become unwittingly embroiled in conflicts with rival gangs. *ibid*)

The survey method of research in sociology involves only a small number of people, we cannot therefore be sure that what is found in one context will apply in other situations as well, or even that two different researchers would come to the same conclusions when studying the same group. (Op Cit: 88, 89). According to Gopal (2003), often sociologists are interested in the characteristics of large numbers of individuals – for example, the political attitudes of the British population as a whole. It would be impossible to study all these people directly, so in such situations researchers engage in sampling.

Sociological research may reveal scientific results which may be against the traditional facts. The findings may be accepted however, the policy makers would not impose them. This may end up rendering the whole research futile. (Ibid). An example can be that if it is discovered that to disband a riotous gang, police have to kill some of them. This might not be implemented by policy makers as it could be perceived morally wrong. According to Ghosh, (2004: 45) The choice or decision involving humans, which is essential for observing human behavior for the use of the method of experiment, becomes difficult.

Thus, reliable scientific data cannot always be collected Sociology as a science is so much valued, but having seen the practice of science becoming increasingly complex, expensive and dependent on government and corporations for funding. It should in turn transform scientific work beginning with values that influence the choice of subjects for research, (ibid).

Sociologists are influenced in their work by the values which they hold and the values of society in which they work.

Values enter research in the choice of problem and methodology of study the formation of hypotheses, the collection and analysis of data and conclusion reached. Moreover values can pose serious problems for scientists because it is often difficult to separate values, from the points of view which guide the research. (Op. cit) According to Cohen (1968), Sociologists see only what they want not paying attention to the subject in question, an example is when Herber investigated the industrial, capitalism in Europe, he saw the influence of Calvinism but not that of technological innovation, (ibid).

Sociology also faces the problem of studying human behavior in a wide range, hence it becomes difficult to understand it fully. The methods used to collect data sometimes do not produce results as expected by sociologists, this is because phenomenon to be generalized are not of a direct perspective kind and can not be measured by e. g. a thermometer or scales like those in natural sciences. Different aspects of human behavior are psychological in nature, and as such, do not submit to measurement.

Sociologists face three bias problems the variability and unpredictability of human nature, formation of terminology of human nature, confusion of terminology and bias due to their values. Humans are more variable than chemical elements in natural sciences. Hence they are disadvantaged because each person has different behavior and are in continuous change in relation to their individual and group experience, (Ibid). An example is Oxygen. It always supports burning and this is always true but one person's behavior would not be the same for another under the same conditions. Hence establishment of human patterns is difficult.

Though these problems exist, their extent can be greatly lessened in the ways outlined below: According to Ghosh (2004: 46) the personal prejudices of an observer can be minimized with the help of some standardized techniques developed for that purpose. The objective of such techniques is to eliminate the subjective bias in the analytical framework of scientific theories. In sociology, difficulties in observation and experimentation may be reduced to a considerable extent by making the enquiry confined to a particular class whose behavior is taken up for study.

If the analysis is carried on for the same situations, circumstances, environment, institutions etc. , it can be broadly realistic and successful.

(Ibid, 2004: 46) Problems can further be reduced by standardizing the terminologies used in its study to all sociologists. For example the terms like society, behaviour, should mean the same thing to all sociologists. It is also important to facilitate a suitable environment to people being interviewed during research to produce correct information.

According to Northrope, (1955), sociological perspective could be used as a way of observing and explaining issues in question, based on the assumption that a different characteristics from the individual that compose it, hence it can help to balance our personal desires and demand of our social environment an example, some times you may find a person who divorces and does not consider where the children would go , this arise a concern to understand why people behave in such a manner without minding the effect they cause to environment sociology limits our person desires that are not accept to other social environment components.

Young, (1975: 4), points out that although many people seem to have the good ideas of society from their experience, they should not affect their results as they may be incorrect. The application of scientific method in sociologists' work rather than common sense should be observed, every fact of information must be verified. According to Giddens (2006), problems arising from causal connections in sociology can be alleviated by not understanding them in too mechanical a way.

The attitudes people have and their subjective reasons for acting as they do are causal factors in relationships between variables in social life. In researches involving questionnaires, misleading findings can be avoided by ensuring that all the items are readily understandable to interviewers and interviewees alike. Ambiguities must be avoided. (Ibid). Questionnaires should also take into consideration the characteristics of respondents. Will they see the point the researcher has in mind in asking a particular question? Have they enough information to answer usefully?

The terms of the questionnaire might be unfamiliar to the respondents. For example, the question ' what is your marital status? ' might baffle some people. It would be more appropriate to ask, ' Are you single, married, separated, or divorced? ' (Op. cit) Another way to alleviate the problems in sociology is by conducting pilot studies in order to pick up problems not anticipated by the investigator. A pilot study is a trial run in which a questionnaire is completed by just a few people. Any difficulties can then be ironed out before the main survey is done. (Giddens, 2006) Pitfalls in sampling can be reduced by picking a sample representative of the group of individuals studied and must be typical of the population as a whole.

To achieve this, random sampling in which a sample is chosen so that every member of the population has the same probability of being included has to be done. The most sophisticated way of obtaining a random sample is to give each member of the population a number and then use a computer to generate a random list, from which the sample is derived - for instance, by picking every tenth number. (Ibid) In conclusion, the essay has discussed the various problems faced by sociology as a science. It has gone further to say <https://assignbuster.com/problems-faced-by-sociology-as-a-science-and-how-they-can-be-alleviated/>

how these can be reduced. From the information highlighted above, Sociological evidence may not always be accurate due to problems like changing of behavior when in front of a researcher, unwillingness of respondent to respond to some questions, the researchers' biased view, wrong identification of the cause of an event.

It has also been limited by researchers who see what they want to see, Unpredictability of human nature, etc. The essay has shown that these problems can be alleviated by standardizing terminologies, avoid understanding the problems in not too a mechanical way. Using simple language in questionnaires, conducting pilot studies, picking a representative group of people from a group to be studied. However, sociological evidence can be trusted further by applying the problem alleviation techniques outlined above.