Revision

Sociology and science

Joan Garrod

This issue contains an exercise to help revise some important points in the debate about sociology and science.

There is also a data exercise to practise your ability to understand and appropriately use data presented in a numerical format.

In addition, there is the second part of the presentation on fertility rates, an important aspect of families, households, population and demographic changes. This one focuses on fertility rates in the UK.

Exercise

Below is a passage outlining some of the debates regarding the nature of science and the degree to which sociology is, should be or could be regarded as a science. The passage contains blanks for you to insert your own words.

This exercise is best done in pairs, so that you and your partner can engage in discussion about which words or phrases would be the most appropriate. Afterwards, you could compare your answers with those of other pairs, to see the extent to which you have agreed — or not.

Fill in the blanks

There are two ways of defining ‘science’. One is —— and the other is ——. ‘Empiricism’ refers to the building of knowledge from ——. The method which arises from this is known as the —— method. This suggests that knowledge is acquired by following a set sequence of steps. These are: ——

Following the ideas of Descartes and Bacon, the physical world came to be regarded as ——, and the purpose of science was to ——. The idea of progress through science was at its peak in the —— century.

——, known as the ‘founding father’ of sociology, argued that a ‘science of society’ was possible, and that the laws of society would be discovered by using scientific principles. The view that the use of the —— method will lead to certain knowledge is known as ——. Durkheim also adopted this approach.

He argued that social phenomena, or ——, could be treated as ‘things’ and could therefore be measured in the same way as physical or natural phenomena. Even ——, whose approach to sociology was so different, believed that societies changed according to ——.

A philosopher of science, ——, believes that knowledge is not as absolute and certain as positivist scientists believe. His argument is that our knowledge of the world is only ——, i.e. it holds for the moment. We cannot be absolutely certain of what is true, only of what is not true. For example, seeing a thousand white swans does not prove that all swans are ——. Seeing one black swan, however, proves that all swans are not ——.
The historian —— criticises the commonly accepted view of how science progresses. Rather than undergoing gradual growth through the accumulation of knowledge, scientific knowledge is characterised by radical changes in perspective, which he calls ‘scientific ——’. Scientific models are called ‘——’, and it is these models which change, with a new one becoming the dominant one. Scientists work as part of a scientific community which socialises them into shared and accepted beliefs, which is why some dominant —— may last for long periods.

As the social sciences do not share one model to which all practitioners subscribe, —— argued that sociology is in a —— state.

However, many ideas and models in the natural sciences are increasingly challenged in the light of new evidence and hypotheses. An example of this is in ——. (Choose any natural science and briefly outline one area within it where scientists are in disagreement with one another — an internet search will provide many examples, though you need to choose just one.) Social scientists are now far from the only ones having to face fierce internal debates.

**Joan Garrod is a managing editor of SOCIOLOGY REVIEW.**

This resource is part of SOCIOLOGY REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to hoddereducation.co.uk/sociologyreview