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# **Realities and perceptions of methodological teaching and debates in post-war British sociology: new evidence from Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979)**

## **Abstract**

This article contains the first systematic analysis of the undergraduate sociology methods course syllabuses collected by Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979). It outlines the major trends in methods teaching in the late 60s and 70s, highlighting the teaching of quantitative methods in this period. But the broader aim of the analysis is to explain how the debates surrounding the rise of feminist sociology and the critiques of ‘positivism’ in the 60s and 70s affected methods teaching in British sociology. The article argues that despite their limited influence on the contents of the methods curriculum, these debates had another, more subtle but pervasive, impact on how methods were *perceived* in the sociology community and which methods could be justifiably seen as important and which – as irrelevant.

## **Keywords**

British sociology, methods courses, Peel, ‘positivism’, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, Wakeford

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## **Introduction**

This paper analyses the teaching of research methods in British sociology in the period 1968-1979, with particular focus on the teaching of quantitative methods. The enquiry is based on previously unexamined material from John Peel’s (1968) and John Wakeford’s (1979) collections of sociology methods course syllabuses. It aims to show what characterised the methods teaching given to undergraduate sociology students in the vital period of academic consolidation after the rapid expansion of sociology in the 60s. But it also aims to review and enhance our current understanding of the general character of British sociology in this period.

The post-war period in the history of British sociology was characterised by rapid academic expansion but also by changes in the way sociology positioned itself towards the society it was studying. The research methods deployed by sociologists shaped their understanding of politics and culture in British society and redefined sociology’s ‘identity’ (cf. Savage, 2010). In particular, the period from the late 1960s and through the 70s was

marked by heated debates on the nature and purpose of sociology. These debates reflected the rise of feminism in sociology and the arrival from the US of movements such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Oakley (2000) argues that the debates were triggered by the publication of three works on methodology – Cicourel's *Method and Measurement* (1964), Glaser and Strauss' *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and Garfinkel's *Ethnomethodology* (1967). It is widely believed that together with feminism, 'as a social movement which infiltrated academia and also had a great deal to say about methodology' (Oakley, 2000: 32), these developments fundamentally changed not only the methodological toolkit but also the whole character of British sociology. They are seen to have brought about a state of 'epistemological anomie' (Bell and Newby, 1977) and given rise to 'paradigm wars' (Oakley, 2000), leading one commentator to claim: 'In the sixties, the British empirical tradition was shaken to its roots by the symbolic interactionist and subsequent methodological techniques' (Bechhofer, 1981: 498).

At the time it was also argued that these movements led to an 'assault on positivism' (Bell and Newby, 1977) and launched a legion of sociologists 'whose perspective was profoundly anti-empiricist' (Bechhofer, 1981: 498). Such arguments assumed that British sociologists in the early post-war period had been more 'empiricist' or 'positivist' in their approach and had accepted the distinction between fact and value and the possibility of establishing the truth about the social world through the application of 'the scientific method'. Such arguments also assumed that by the 1970s sociology had the opportunity to leave the empiricist approach behind. It was also believed that empiricism and positivism were somehow closely bound to the survey method, although there was scope to think that 'many alternatives to conventional survey research are no less positivistic' (Bell and Newby, 1977). The only systematic, and by far the strongest, response to these critiques came from the work of Catherine Marsh in the late 70s (cf. Marsh, 1979; 1980; 1981).

My aim in this article is not to take part in this debate by re-assessing the claims made by each side. It is my aim, however, to examine our understanding of these debates (or so-called 'paradigm wars') and evaluate to what extent claims that they transformed the character of sociology in the 60s and 70s are justified. Through examination of the methods courses in the sociology undergraduate curriculum in this period, we have a valuable opportunity to find out what the *real impact* of these debates actually was and see what they changed *in practice* for sociology students. It is, of course, true that the debates on positivism were essentially theoretical. However, given that at the core of these debates was the idea that a new way of *doing* sociology was needed, it seems appropriate to be asking questions about whether these debates had any practical effect on sociology method teaching. Was the 'assault on positivism' accompanied with a decrease in the teaching of surveys and an increase in the teaching of 'non-positivist' methods?

### **An Overview of Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979)**

John Peel's collection of syllabuses was compiled for the 15<sup>th</sup> conference of the Teachers' Section of the British Sociological Association (BSA) in 1968. The Teachers' section flourished in the 1960s – this was a period of continuous expansion of sociology courses and degrees in the universities, going hand-in-hand with an increased interest in the teaching of sociology.

Peel collected syllabuses of methods courses from 26 sociology departments. The present analysis is based on data from 25 sociology departments, since Oxford University, which only taught courses to postgraduate students, has been excluded. Peel's compilation contains

syllabuses of both theory and methods courses<sup>1</sup> but the present analysis focuses only on the methods course syllabuses.

Wakeford's collection was conceived as a continuation of Peel's and was prepared for the session *The Teaching of Methodology in Sociology* in the *Conference on Methodology and Techniques of Sociology*, held in Lancaster in January 1979.

Wakeford collected data from sociology departments in 53 universities and polytechnics (out of the 77 he initially approached). From these 53 sociology departments, data from only 49 have been analysed here. Data from the London Graduate School of Business Studies, Imperial College, Manchester Business School and Oxford University have been excluded since these institutions taught only postgraduate courses.

Both collections contain materials of similar type – outline of course content, reading lists and sample exam papers. This allows a reasonable comparison between the state of methods teaching in sociology departments in 1968 and in 1979. Many sociology departments did not strictly follow the structure for reply suggested by Peel and Wakeford but, with a small number of exceptions, they all provided the requested material and the material needed for the present analysis. Wakeford's collection contains a one-page introduction comparing methods teaching in 1979 to 1968; but neither Peel nor Wakeford analysed the material in their collections. While the Wakeford collection was discussed at a conference on Graduate Research Methodology Teaching in Sociology held in Warwick in December 1979 (cf. Burgess and Bulmer, 1981), this is the first time that the data Peel and Wakeford collected have been analysed and compared.

## Research Questions

The analysis is organised around three main questions:

*First, how many sociology departments in the UK offered at least one methods course that included statistical training in 1967 compared to 1978?*

The aim is to find out how many sociology departments regarded the teaching of statistics (regardless of quantity and level of sophistication) as a necessary component and whether, between 1968 and 1979, the number of sociology departments where statistics was taught diminished. To answer this question, the total number of sociology methods courses offered at each department was counted. Where courses have the same name but are separated between academic years as in, for instance, Research methods I, Research methods II and Research methods III, they have been listed as three courses.

The number of methods courses in each department that contain *some* statistics teaching were also counted. At this initial stage, no differentiation was made between the amount of statistics or level of sophistication of the statistical material in the courses; but courses which only contained a discussion of the survey method were not considered as providing statistical training if there wasn't clear evidence that the teaching of this method was accompanied by the teaching how to do statistical analysis of survey data.

Lastly, the number of departments which offered *separate* statistics courses were counted; it being reasonable to assume that a separate statistics course would provide students with the opportunity to acquire more advanced skills and longer time to practise them.

*Second, what methodological techniques were taught in undergraduate methods courses?*

After a preliminary examination of the syllabuses in both collections, I made a list with the following methodological techniques: statistical techniques and computing; survey method and questionnaires; observation (including participant observation); interviews; analysis of documents; experiments; and philosophy of science/method. No methodological techniques reported in the syllabuses were excluded from this list. The sociology departments in which methods courses discuss 'positivism' were also counted in an attempt to trace the popularity of the usage of this term and gauge the influence of the debates surrounding positivism on methods teaching. No inferences were made about the *quality* of teaching of methodological techniques; this part of the analysis is limited to indicating whether particular techniques were *mentioned* in the syllabuses. No comparison of the teaching of methods between sociology departments was made, except in the case of statistics and computing, where the analysis distinguished between sociology departments that taught courses containing little statistics (with no sign of practical work exercises) and those where sociology methods courses contained advanced and more intense statistics teaching (usually indicated by the teaching of more sophisticated techniques, practical workshops in computing and the use of more advanced statistical textbooks). It could be hypothesised that the teaching of statistical techniques and computing, compared to the teaching of 'qualitative methods' in this period declined due to increasing popularity of feminist and 'anti-positivist' approaches to sociology, which claimed that statistics was not an adequate tool for doing sociological research.

*Third: What was the level sophistication of statistics teaching? Did courses involve the teaching of practical statistical skills, or did they limit themselves to introducing students simply to the existence of the method?*

In this part of the analysis, *only* statistics teaching in different sociology departments was compared. Three main criteria were used to assess the level of sophistication of statistics teaching in methods courses. The types of statistical techniques (e.g. descriptive, inferential) that were mentioned in the syllabuses were examined – for instance, more sophisticated statistical modelling, inferential statistics etc. were taken as a sign of deeper engagement with the subject. I also noted the statistical textbooks that were mentioned in the syllabus and, from an additional examination of the contents of those textbooks, it was possible to determine which would best facilitate the teaching of practical statistical skills. Lastly, computer usage was examined, which was taken as a sign of a more sophisticated level of statistics teaching.

Although syllabuses are a reliable indicator of what was being taught on a particular course, it is not a guarantee in itself that all of the mentioned material was actually taught. The results of this enquiry are conditioned by how much departments chose to report, what they chose to highlight in their syllabuses and how they described it. Any conclusions from this analysis – regarding the methodological make-up of academic sociology and regarding any effects that debates of 'positivism' and feminism had on the teaching of particular methods, are limited to the period under investigation. It is, of course, possible that new trends in the teaching of methods in British sociology emerged after 1979; and that the methodological debates had a later impact on what was being taught in sociology departments which is not recorded here. Data on sociology methods courses may well exist for the period after 1979; however, without a thorough examination of these data, I'm not in a position to say whether they are in comparable format and could be used to extend the present study. However, an examination of the period after 1979 remains a possibility for future study.

## Results

### *Methods courses*

The number of methods courses expanded nearly three-fold between 1967-1978<sup>2</sup> (Table 1). This was partly due to the expansion of the number of higher education institutions teaching sociology in this period, and partly due to the fact that the number of methods courses on offer within sociology departments also grew – the vast majority of departments in 1967 offered just one methods course, by 1978 many offered two or more. So it is clear that by 1978, the teaching of methods had become an essential part of the sociology teaching.

The number of methods courses that taught statistics as a proportion of the total number of methods courses reported (Table 1) decreased slightly, from 67.9% to 56.1%, between 1967 and 1978. There was also a relative decrease in the number of separate statistics methods courses – in 1967, 25% of all courses taught exclusively statistics, while in 1978 this dropped to 20.4%. Does this mean that statistics was becoming a less popular subject in methods classes? Not necessarily. By 1978 the total number of methods courses *within* each university had expanded while the number of methods courses teaching exclusively statistics remained stable. This suggests that the general expansion of methods courses was aimed at establishing new courses devoted to the teaching of methods other than statistics. Therefore, the drop in the proportion of methods courses which contained statistics is best explained not as a result of sociology departments deciding *not to teach statistics*, but rather as a result of their decision *to expand methods courses in other areas and their ability to put this decision into practice*.

That the teaching of statistics was following a stable trend between 1967-78 is further supported by the fact that the proportion of sociology departments teaching *at least one* methods course that contained statistical training changed very little in this period: in 1967, 76% of sociology departments taught at least one methods course that contained some statistics while in 1978, this was 75.5%. The proportion of sociology departments teaching at least one *separate* statistics course also shows little change: 28% in 1967 as opposed to 26.5% in 1978 (Table 2).

It is difficult to estimate how much statistical training might be regarded as being ‘enough’ to produce statistically literate sociologists in this or any other period. From an historical point of view, the important result that arises from a study of this vital period of consolidation of academic sociology in Britain, is that sociology students were not deprived of opportunities to learn *some* statistics as part of their undergraduate degrees. More importantly and, perhaps surprisingly given common assumptions about what was happening during this period, those opportunities did not diminish in any way. The evidence shows that there was virtually no change.

[Table 1 and Table 2 here]

### *Methodological techniques*

In the second part of the analysis, I compared the methodological techniques taught in sociology undergraduate methods courses in 1967 and 1978. Results are displayed in Tables 3 and 4.

There was little change in the overall amount of teaching of statistics and computing in this period – 76% of sociology departments in 1967 taught statistical techniques, as opposed to 77.1% in 1978. We get similar results when we restrict the comparison to those sociology departments which taught statistics and computing at a more practical and advanced level – in 1967, only 48% of sociology departments taught advanced statistics, as opposed to 54.2% in 1978. This shows two things: firstly, that the continued academic growth of sociology that took place between 1968 and 1979, notably the rise of the polytechnics, was not accompanied by a decrease in the teaching of statistics in sociology methods courses; and secondly, that if the rise of feminism and the spread of ‘anti-positivism’ had any effect at all on the character of sociology in the UK, this effect *did not spread as far as the teaching of methods to undergraduate sociology students*. If these movements did indeed nurture any scepticism, even hostility towards statistical methods, the practical effects of such attitudes lied outside the circles of the research methods teachers and their classrooms.

An overall stability is further manifested by the lack of change in the proportion of sociology departments which taught the survey method as part of their methods courses – 92% in 1967 as opposed to 89.6% in 1978. The predominant presence of surveys in the syllabuses in 1967 is not surprising given that in the early post-war period this was the only empirical method that featured in sociology undergraduate degrees<sup>3</sup> and was one that had a lasting legacy in UK sociology departments. What is more remarkable, is the lack of change in the proportion of sociology departments teaching the survey method in methods courses *during the 70s* when it was a common belief that British sociology had already gone through ‘a positivist’ past, characterised by an overuse of survey and statistical research methods, and that it was now emerging from this past and moving towards a more pluralistic and ‘anti-positivist’ future. But examination of the data from the teaching of research methods reveals that there was no so-called ‘emergence’: neither the debates surrounding positivism nor any growing movements within British sociology that may have been against statistics and the survey method, had any practical effect on the teaching of surveys.

*What kind of methods teaching could have given the impression that sociology had been ‘positivist’?*

It is, however, worth asking what was fuelling and sustaining this common perception that British sociology had been committed to positivist research practices from which it was, apparently, struggling to emerge in the 1970s. An article by Platt from 1981 is the only systematic critique of this argument. The article, however, is limited to examination of the use of research methods in published sociological research. Platt shows that the amount of published sociological research using quantitative, i.e. ‘positivist’ methods cannot be said to have been predominant in the period 1950s-70s and that it remained consistently stable throughout this period. But what about methods teaching? Examining the question at this level allows us to distinguish between the effects that the teaching of statistical techniques, on the one the hand, and the teaching of survey method, on the other, may have had on supporting and sustaining the myth of a positivist past and anti-positivist present in the 1970s.

First, research that I have done on the teaching of methods at the LSE in the 1940s and 1950s shows that the teaching of statistical methods was done at an elementary level and limited almost entirely to the teaching of surveys and sampling. Whatever was fuelling British sociologists’ beliefs about ‘positivism’ in British sociology, it cannot have been related to the teaching of statistics *per se*. The present study reveals little or no change in the proportion of sociology departments teaching statistics at a practical and more advanced level in 1967 compared to 1978. So British sociology had never been as statistically obsessed as

adversaries of statistical sociology were arguing during the period of the ‘paradigm wars’; and neither has it been as deprived of statistics teaching from the 1960s onwards, as supporters of statistical sociology have argued. If there were problems with the teaching of statistics in sociology, these problems were not due to the *absence* of statistics from the sociology curriculum.

We can also see that the misconception about ‘positivism’ could not have been fuelled by an ‘obsession with experiments’, either – experiments remained consistently the least popular methodological technique in the sociological curriculum and experienced negligible rise – from 36% in 1967 to 39.6% in 1978 (Table 3).

If the misconception was fuelled at all by anything that was happening in the classroom, then it is most reasonable to assume that it was fuelled by the all-pervasive presence of surveys teaching in the methods curriculum, both before 1967 and in the period 1967-1978. This makes it easier to understand why there was a mismatch between what was commonly believed about the relationship between quantitative methods and sociology among a large proportion of sociologists and what was said about this relationship in official reports about the state of social science (Rosenbaum, 1971; ESRC, 1987). While the first group could believe that British sociology was ‘positivist’ because of the impression created by the dominant teaching of surveys; the second group, the writers of the reports, supported by a small group of sociologists interested in the more advanced teaching of statistics and statistical analysis, have repeatedly insisted that British sociology has not been sufficiently empirical and statistical.

Unfortunately, the data do not allow us to reliably compare the level of survey teaching between sociology departments and so it is difficult to judge how much of the teaching of surveys resulted in acquisition of practical empirical skills for conducting a survey. We could speculate that, since statistics is the main methodological technique used in the preparation and analysis of survey data, those sociology departments which taught practical and more sophisticated statistics would also engage more closely with surveys. However, since conducting a survey is more than doing statistics; and doing statistics is more than conducting a survey, it’s not possible to go beyond mere speculation.

### *Teaching of qualitative methods*

Another important question concerns the teaching of qualitative methods. The data show a marked rise in the teaching of ‘qualitative’ methods – teaching of observation grew from 60% in 1967 to 89.6% in 1978; of interviews – from 48% to 75%; and of documentary analysis – from 44% to 58.3%. This development was part and parcel of the establishment of new sociology departments and the growth of old sociology departments within sociology departments that took place in the 60s. In the first part of the analysis, we saw that the number of sociology methods courses increased between 1967 and 1978 but that this was not accompanied by any proportional increase in the rise of courses containing an element of statistical teaching. It was suggested that this was due to a rise in the teaching of methodological techniques, other than statistics, and we can see now that there is sound evidence to support this suggestion. It could be argued, therefore, that the ‘paradigm wars’ had at least one substantial effect – to increase the presence of ‘qualitative’ methods teaching in the sociology curriculum. However, two considerations need to be addressed before reaching any such conclusion.

First, ‘qualitative’ methods were *not* a small minority in 1967 – they were well represented in the curriculum and their rise was not accompanied by a decrease in the teaching of statistics and surveys. As already pointed out, an examination of the teaching of



methods in sociology at the LSE in the early post-war period showed that the survey method was not only the most predominant technique taught in sociology methods courses; it was the *only* one. But the Peel data suggest that by the late 1960s, this had already changed – they show that sociology departments were *already* teaching a variety of research methods and that by 1967 there was *already* an existing and consistent trend towards a gradual increase in the teaching of qualitative methods. It seems likely that this trend emerged and gained momentum before 1967 and would have continued even without the support of the anti-positivism arguments at the core of the ‘paradigm wars’. This is not to say that the ‘paradigm wars’ did not play any role in helping to support this increase, possibly by providing a theoretical and epistemological justification for it; and it is also possible that the new diversity of method helped, in turn, to stimulate and sustain the ‘paradigm wars’. But, given their limited impact on teaching practices, these ‘wars’ were not the motive force that sociologists believed changed all of sociology, at least not in this period.

The increase in the teaching of qualitative methods can also partly be explained by a cohort effect. As the late 60s and 70s were a period of consolidation after rapid expansion, it is reasonable to expect that more sociology graduates became available to work as university teachers in sociology, unlike earlier cohorts of sociology teachers, who were graduates of a variety of other subjects. These new cohorts would already have received some introduction to a variety of ‘qualitative’ methods in the late 60s and early 70s and therefore would be able to teach them at undergraduate level during the 70s. A greater diversity in the make-up of sociology graduates could help to explain the expansion in the amount and variety of methods courses that we observe in the 1978 syllabuses.

By far the most remarkable increase can be observed in the number of departments which taught a philosophy of science/philosophy of methods component – there was a nearly three-fold increase in their proportion, from 28% in 1967 to 77% in 1978; and in the number of departments which discussed ‘positivism’ as part of the curriculum – their proportion rose from just 4% to 35.6%. It is here, and only here, that the ‘paradigm wars’ may be said to have had an effect on what was going in methods teaching in sociology between 1967 and 1978 – they added a philosophical component to the teaching of methods in that period and, to an extent, influenced the type of philosophical issues, such as ‘positivism’ that were being discussed. Overall, however, the ‘paradigm wars’ had little effect on what methods were taught in sociology.

[Table 3 here]

### *Teaching of statistics*

Table 4 further supports some of the conclusions reached in the previous sections: it shows that about half of sociology departments in 1967 and 1978 offered methods courses which contained an element of advanced or practical statistical training and that this was almost always complemented by a list of recommended textbooks to assist the learning of practical statistical skills (compare the columns ‘Advanced Statistical Training’ and ‘Practical Textbooks’ in Table 4).

By far the greatest change in the teaching of statistics between 1967-78 was the spread of the use of computing facilities. In 1967, only about 8.7% of sociology departments which taught statistical methods used computers; in 1979, this rose to around 37.5%. But the significance of this result lies not so much in that it shows a rise in computer use but in the fact that while at the same time *computer use rose, the number of sociology departments teaching advanced statistics remained, proportionately, about the same*. This suggests that computing at this time, at least when considered on its own, did not play a decisive role on

whether and what level of statistics was being taught in sociology methods courses. Although it is reasonable to assume that computing offered an opportunity to make the statistical material easier to comprehend and practise, it is more likely that only those sociology departments which were already committed to teaching a more advanced level of statistics in 1967, took advantage of the newly developed computing facilities. The better availability of computers itself could not have been a powerful enough factor to convince sociology departments teaching little or no statistics in sociology methods courses to take up statistics. And, of course, it should be borne in mind, that the 1970s was a time when computing itself was a skill that had to be learned on top of any other skills included in the curriculum. If computing made the acquisition and practising of statistical skills easier, it did so only for those staff and students who already possessed computing skills or who were in a position to learn such skills.

A report published in 1970 by the Computer Board for Universities and Research Councils suggests that few social scientists were eager or even prepared to learn computing skills. Computing was still being seen as ‘an esoteric or specialised activity’, not as ‘a versatile tool useful in any work with a factual or intellectual content’ (Pierce quoted in Computer Board for Universities and Research Councils, 1970: 5). With specific reference to social science and art students, the report emphasised that that by far the biggest problem with teaching computing to social science students was *attitude*:

To show them how a computer can be made to do things which they do not see to be valuable is of little use [...] they do not see the reason for studying statistics or computing, and many of them would prefer not to know about these topics! Strong support from the staff of the Department covering their main interest in essential (Computer Board for Universities and Research Councils, 1970: 17-18).

It seems that the teaching of statistics in sociology, or lack of it, is much more deeply influenced by factors other than technical skills and computing facilities. Engagement with statistics appears to depend, above all, on the presence or absence of a general disposition to teach and learn statistics, nurtured by the attitude of sociology teachers themselves. If sociology’s engagement with statistical methods in this country changed during the post-war period, this didn’t happen in the decade between the late 1960s and late 1970s. The level of sophistication of statistics teaching and its proliferation in this decade remained largely uninfluenced either by hostile epistemological debates or by the spread of computing, suggesting the existence of much more deep-rooted and shiftless attitudes than has hitherto been recognised.

[Table 4 here]

## Discussion

The analysis of the evidence from the Peel and Wakeford syllabus collections shows that there was little change in the content of the methods curriculum in sociology between 1967 and 1978, in spite of the raging ‘paradigm wars’, or any other developments taking place in in British sociology in this period. In what way, then, are the results of this analysis important for our understanding of both methods teaching and the ‘paradigm wars’? Do these results tell us anything new and important, perhaps even surprising?

In her overview of the methodological debates of this period, Oakley argued: ‘we cannot expect the paradigm argument to make much sense on a practical level’ (Oakley, 2000: 42). To put it simply, Oakley argued that the world of methodological debates and the world of

methods teaching were two separate worlds – one is a world of epistemology, the other a world of methodological techniques; one is philosophical and abstract, the other – practical; one is a world of research, the other – the world of teaching. Given this, it is, perhaps, not so surprising that the ‘paradigm wars’ had little effect on the contents of the methods curriculum between 1967-78. Belonging, as they did, to a different ‘world’ it was never their *aim* to bring any changes to the methods curriculum. In this sense, it could be argued, that the evidence from the analysis of Peel and Wakeford, presented here, is curious but says nothing fundamental about our understanding of the methodological development (in both debates and teaching) of sociology in the early post-war period. The relationship, or rather the lack of a relationship, revealed here, is not something totally unexpected.

An examination of the main features of the ‘paradigm wars’ *appears* to lend support to this ‘two-worlds’ argument. At the centre, the debates revolving around the so-called ‘positivism’ in methodology, were characterised by a remarkable *lack* of dialogue – much has been said about ‘positivism’ by those opposing it; little, if anything at all, by those who support it in their teaching or in practice. It is questionable if there were any sociologists *at all* supporting ‘positivism’ – since the days of Comte, ‘positivism’ was ‘almost never a self-applied label’ (Marsh, 1982: 49) and by the 1970s it had already lost ‘any claim to an accepted and standard meaning’ (Giddens, 1974: 2); ‘while the word is full of sound and fury, it signifies nothing’ (Phillips (1992) quoted in Oakley, 2000: 30). And, we are told, quantitative sociologists, who were, in practice, the targets of anti-positivist attacks, ‘much less commonly defend what they do [...] maybe because they feel sufficiently secure not to bother’ (Oakley, 2000: 29). It could, however, also be argued that both quantitative and qualitative sociologists have fallen into the trap of thinking that there is ‘one best way’, and one best way only, to do sociology; each group arguing for the methodology they themselves have adopted (cf. Crompton, 2008).

The debates were also characterised by a lack of direct reference to real examples from research and/or teaching; they almost always took place at a highly abstract, philosophical level. The result was a ‘tendency for philosophical issues and technical issues to be treated simultaneously and occasionally to be confused’ (Bryman, 1984: 75). In fact, the survival of the debates depended on this confusion – if the debates were taken on the level of the teaching and use of methods in research, then it quickly became apparent that it was difficult, and in most cases unjustified, to establish a clear symmetry between epistemological positions, which were the focus of the debates, and research techniques (Bryman, 1984). All this suggests that the idea behind these debates was not the improvement of methodological competence of staff and students through changes in the content of methods courses; or the improvement of the communication and understanding between sociologists competent in quantitative methods and those competent in qualitative methods. Perhaps the fact that discussions on ‘positivism’ were being introduced into the methods curriculum, as this article has shown, was a change which could be seen as ‘sufficient’.

However, the ‘two-worlds’ argument and the evidence that could be used to support it indicate that a problematic divide existed within sociology. Why did this divide exist in the first place and what sustained it? How could it be healthy for a subject to nurture divides between methods theorists and methods teachers? How could it be healthy for what happens in one group not to affect what happens in the other, given that, both groups have basically one and the same concern – methods? This situation has not gone unnoticed since the 70s (Coxon, 1973; Bulmer, 1985); but the discussions have rarely examined teaching practices based on systematic empirical evidence. The evidence presented here, which shows a stark contrast between the reality of teaching and the reality of the ‘methods wars’, is valuable because it enables us, for the first time, to put to the question this divide using *empirical* evidence.

But there is more. At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that there was, and still is, a common perception that the ‘paradigm wars’ fundamentally changed the character of British sociology. In light of the evidence from Peel and Wakeford showing no changes in the content of methods teaching in a short but vital period, this perception seems, at the very least, rather odd. This, somewhat paradoxical, situation is revealing for a couple of reasons. First, it says much about the priorities that British sociology has chosen for itself; it shows that what sociologists perceive as driving the subject, perhaps more strongly than anything else, are epistemological, theoretical debates, and not necessarily debates aimed at solving the practical problems related to the improvement of methodological competence through teaching. This exposes a particular preference of British sociologists to regard theoretical and philosophical shifts as watershed moments in the history of the subject, despite the fact, that, as the example here suggests, these shifts had only a limited, and far from universal, influence.

However, could there be something else, something that not only helped to sustain the perception that the ‘paradigm wars’ changed British sociology for good but also gave this perception substance? The lack of measurable impact of the ‘paradigm wars’ on the sociology methods curriculum prompts us to look somewhere else for a possible influence that these wars might have had on British sociology that can explain further why they were perceived as so important.

There is strong evidence to suggest that by the early 80s the ‘paradigm wars’ had helped nurture a ‘general anti-quantitative culture within British sociology’ (Burgess and Bulmer, 1981: 480). The contemporary manifestations of this ‘anti-quantitative culture’ included: weaker quantitative orientation among sociology graduate students compared to graduate students in other social science subjects (cf. Marsh (1972) in Burgess and Bulmer, 1981: 479); a dearth of articles based on quantitative research in British sociology and a predominance of articles based on non-empirical research (Bechhofer, 1981: 499-500); ‘little interest in the potentialities of official statistics for sociological analysis’ and ‘disinclination to undertake large-scale empirical research’ (Bulmer, 1980: 505); but also the impression that quantitative research is merely the production and analysis of ‘facts about society’ by ‘social technicians’ (cf. Rose, 1981: 515) and the idea – ‘convincingly argued’ – that surveys ‘are in any case manipulative and convey a calculating bureaucratic stance’ (Wakeford, 1981: 509).

In addition, it could be argued that the debates stirred up a particular polemic within the sociological community aimed at creating a sense of solidarity among disparate groups of non-quantitatively minded sociologists which also served their professional agendas, especially the agendas of emerging feminist sociologists (Oakley, 2000; also see Stanley and Wise, 1983). Thus, by the late 60s and early 70s, ‘qualitative’ research came to be viewed, quite unambiguously, as the *preferred* paradigm with quantitative research being ear-marked as the work of the patriarchal devil’ (Oakley, 1999: 249, *italics mine*).

The evidence analysed in this article refers to a brief period in the post-war history of British sociology. However, despite its limitations, the analysis does give a clear indication that the anti-quantitative culture of British sociology, that was identified in the late 70s, *did not result from the lack, or significant underrepresentation, of the teaching of statistical and survey methods as compared to other methods*. The debates on ‘positivism’ did not have an effect of decreasing the amount of teaching of quantitative methods; but they were powerful enough to instil a belief, a certain attitude among sociologists, that using these methods was somehow ‘un-sociological’ or *insufficiently* sociological and that there are other options, which could successfully *replace* them. Sociology students, developing under the influence of teachers who held such beliefs, emerged unconvinced that ‘empirical work is still necessary, possible and enjoyable’ (Rose, 1981: 517). The ‘paradigm wars’ had succeeded in

instilling *preferences*; at nurturing some attitudes and stifling others. This is where their *perceived* power came from.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reasons why quantitative methods teaching in the 60s and 70s *could* remain unaffected by the increasingly hostile intellectual culture in this period – an exhaustive explanation would have to consider not only any potential influence of the contemporary intellectual movements, such as the ‘positivism’ debates discussed here, but also institutional and funding factors. However, it is essential that, in combination with the challenging and even hostile epistemological views coming from outside the classroom, the relevance, effectiveness and ultimate success of the teaching of quantitative methods would have been largely compromised (something which, unfortunately, neither the Peel and Wakeford, nor any other available data from this period, allow us to investigate).

It is, of course, possible that the methodological debates had a later, delayed, effect on the contents of methods teaching and that, for instance, the teaching of quantitative methods diminished in the 80s and 90s. However, there is no reason why the lack of *immediate* impact of these debates on the contents of the sociology methods curriculum should not be put to the question. This article has provided new evidence to show that the methodological debates of the 60s and 70s had weak and almost no immediate influence on the contents of the sociology methods curriculum. It has also argued that they had a long-term and pervasive effect on how the various methods in this curriculum were *perceived*; most importantly, which methods were seen as *relevant*. This new evidence makes it possible to study empirically one of the fundamental divides in British sociology; to reveal how preferences for methodological theory, and not methodological teaching, guide the understanding of the subject and its history; and to understand why the mere presence of quantitative methods courses in the sociological curriculum is not enough to produce statistically literate sociologists. With particular reference to the statistical education of young sociologists, the article makes it clear that if British sociology were to set itself the goal of educating graduates in statistical literacy, now and in the future, curriculum changes would be just as important as the creation of an intellectual climate in which students could appreciate the importance, relevance and fundamental need for statistical understanding.

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## Notes

1. Attached to the Peel collection is another collection of syllabuses containing ‘Details of courses mainly concerned with Social Structure and Comparative Social Institutions in British universities and colleges’. This was compiled in 1962 by Peel and Wakeford. Data from these courses have not been analysed here.

2. Peel's and Wakeford's collections were published in 1968 and 1979, respectively. The syllabus data, however, refer to methods courses taught in the academic year previous to the publication of each collection, i.e. 1967 and 1978.
3. I describe in detail why this was the case in a not yet published article in which I examine the types of sociology courses at the LSE (1904-1979).

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### **Author Biography**

Plamena Panayotova graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2014 with a First Class MA Honours Degree in Sociology & Psychology. In 2015, she completed a MSc by Research (with distinction) in Sociology. She has now completed her PhD in Sociology at Edinburgh on the history of British sociology, particularly, its relationship with statistics. Her wider interests include the history of the natural and the social sciences in general and their mutual influence and interaction.

**Table 1.** Analysis of undergraduate methods courses in sociology departments in UK universities in 1967 and 1978. *Source:* Peel (1968); Wakeford (1979).

	Methods courses reported	Methods courses teaching <i>some</i> statistics	Separate statistics methods courses
Peel (1968) %	28	19 67.9%	7 25%
Wakeford (1979) %	98	55 56.1%	20 20.4%



**Table 2.** Analysis of undergraduate methods courses in UK sociology departments in 1967 and 1978. *Source:* Peel (1968); Wakeford (1979).

	Departments reported	Departments offering <i>at least</i> one methods course teaching some statistics	Departments offering at least one separate statistics course
Peel (1968) %	25	19 76.0%	7 28%
Wakeford (1979) %	49	37 75.5%	13 26.5%

**Table 3.** Analysis of methodological techniques taught in undergraduate methods courses in UK sociology departments in 1967 and 1978. *Source:* Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979).

	Sociology departments teaching UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching UG methods courses (without missing data)	Sociology departments teaching statistics and computing in UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching surveys and questionnaires in UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching (participant) observation in UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching interviews in UG methods courses
Peel (1968)	25	25	12 (19) <b>48%</b> (76%) <sup>b</sup>	23 <b>92%</b>	15 <b>60%</b>	12 <b>48%</b>
Wakeford (1979)	49	48 <sup>a</sup>	26 (37) <b>54.2%</b> (77.1%)	43 <b>89.6%</b>	43 <b>89.6%</b>	36 <b>75%</b>

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup>Data from one university (Aberdeen) do not contain sufficient detail on specific methodological techniques, and has therefore been omitted from the analysis in this table.

<sup>b</sup>Percentages in brackets refer to the proportion of departments teaching statistics both where there was little engagement with statistics and little sign of practical work; and where the engagement with statistics was more advanced. Percentages that are not in brackets refer to only the proportion of departments where the engagement with statistics was more advanced.

*Source:* Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979).

**Table 3 (continued).** Analysis of methodological techniques taught in undergraduate methods courses in UK sociology departments in 1967 and 1978. *Source:* Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979).

	Sociology departments teaching UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching UG methods courses (without missing data)	Sociology departments teaching analysis of documents in UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching experiments in UG methods courses	Sociology departments teaching philosophy of science/ methodology in UG methods courses	Sociology departments in which UG methods courses discuss positivism
Peel (1968)	25	25	11 <b>44%</b>	9 <b>36%</b>	7 <b>28%</b>	1 <b>4%</b>
Wakeford (1979)	49	48	28 <b>58.3%</b>	19 <b>39.6%</b>	37 <b>77.1%</b>	17 <b>35.4%</b>

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup>Data from one university (Aberdeen) do not contain sufficient detail on specific methodological techniques, and has therefore been omitted from the analysis in this table.

<sup>b</sup>Percentages in brackets refer to the proportion of departments teaching statistics both where there was little engagement with statistics and little sign of practical work; and where the engagement with statistics was more advanced. Percentages that are not in brackets refer to only the proportion of departments where the engagement with statistics was more advanced.

Source: Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979).

**Table 4.** Analysis of the statistical courses taught in sociology departments in 1967 and 1978.

	Total Number of departments	Total number of departments (without missing data <sup>a</sup> )	Advanced Statistical Training	Practical Textbooks <sup>b</sup>	Computing
Peel (1968)	25	25	12 48%		
Wakeford (1979)	49	48	26 54.2%		
Peel (1968)	25	20		12 60%	
Wakeford (1979)	49	45		32 71.1%	
Peel (1968)	25	23			2 8.7%
Wakeford (1979)	49	48			18 37.5%

Notes:

<sup>a</sup>Only those departments which gave clear indication of advanced statistical teaching, which listed practical textbooks and use of computers are used in the analysis in this table.

<sup>b</sup>Practical statistical textbooks include numerous titles, which could not all be listed here. For specific titles, please look up the relevant syllabuses in Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979). Decisions whether to consider textbooks as facilitating the teaching of practical skills, or not, were made on the basis of background knowledge of the most popular of these textbooks. It should be noted, however, that it is, ultimately, up to teachers to use textbooks in a way that facilitates the learning of practical statistical skills. This analysis is limited to assessing the *opportunity* of these textbooks to have been used in a good way.

In 1978, the proportion of departments using practical statistical textbooks exceeds the proportion of departments teaching statistics at an advanced/practical level because, in some cases, the syllabuses comprised only a list of recommended readings but little or no information about what exactly was taught in particular courses – so there are entries where a course is marked as not offering advanced statistical training but also as using practical textbooks.

Source: Peel (1968) and Wakeford (1979).

