

Max Weber and Authority

Sociology skills

- Analysing and evaluating a piece of writing
- Understanding the nature of power relationships

Key skills

- Communication

Stimulus materials

Max Weber (1864 - 1920) was a famous German sociologist who is still important and influential today. He said that there are three ways in which people can have power over us. Most forms of power combine two or three of the following elements.

Legal authority - We agree that some people have the right to tell us what to do because of the law or the position they are in. They can usually only control one or two parts of our lives, but we do not let them control everything.

Traditional authority - We obey some people because we do. People always have obeyed certain people and respected them. They never stop to question what they do.

Charismatic authority - Some people have such amazing power of personality that we just listen and follow. They seem to be better and stronger than ordinary people.

Understanding the stimulus

1. When did Max Weber live?
2. Where was he born?
3. What did he study?
4. What are the three forms of authority?
5. Can you think of an example of a person from history or from real life who is an example of each type of authority?
6. Suggest which type of authority is probably the most sensible to follow.
7. What type of authority could be very dangerous to follow?

Development and Revision

1. Sometimes people follow leaders because they are frightened of what will happen if they do not. This is known as coercion. Coercion only works for a short time. Why is this?
2. Describe how teachers use authority to control children in any situation you can think of.