THEORIES ABOUT HOW SOCIETIES WORK

The main theories in sociology can be divided into two groups:

**Structural Theories** **Social Action Theories**

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| These theories say that the ‘rules’ of society **structure** behaviour. We think and behave the way we do, because we have **learnt** how to do it. We have been through a process of **socialisation**. The ‘rules’ existed before we came along and will exist after we have gone. The ‘rules’ are therefore **external** to us. They have a reality of their own. |  | These theories say that society is produced by individuals **interpreting** what is going on around them, and choosing to act in a certain way. Although individuals **share meanings** with others, this is not the same as learning ‘rules’. Society is constantly being **created and recreated** by the actions of individuals. |

Think of the following example:

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| What is going on in this classroom is the result of the socialisation process. The students have been taught how to behave as students through their experiences in school since the age of 5. The teacher has been taught the role of teacher by observing other teachers and through teacher training. The result is a classroom where everyone conforms to the norms, the expected and acceptable behaviours. |  | What is going on in this classroom is that every individual is interpreting the situation and making choices about how to behave. The interpretations are likely to be similar because everyone is a member of the same culture and shares the meanings that are common in that culture. Students are choosing to interact in a certain way, and the teacher is choosing to interact in a certain way. What is going on is the end result of all those choices. |

Which do you think best describes what you are experiencing now???

In the past sociological theories have tended to be basically structural or basically action theories, and that is how we will study them,

**but …………..** modern sociology acknowledges that both approaches offer useful explanations of human behaviour.

**Anthony Giddens**, who is the best known modern sociologist, has put forward a theory called “**structuratio**n” which looks at the interaction between structural forces in society and individual actions.

**Structural Theories 1.**

Some structural theorists say that the ‘rules’ that govern human social behaviour are based on **agreement or consensus**. They argue that the ‘rules’ which structure society are like they are because most people agree with them.

The main structural consensus theory is **FUNCTIONALISM**.

Functionalists not only say that the ‘rules’ came from general consensus, but that they **function** for the good of individuals and of society as a whole.

One of the first Functionalist sociologists was **Emile Durkheim** ( 1858-1917). To clarify what he meant by the structures of society functioning for the good of society he compared society to a living organism, like a human body:

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| A body has lots of different parts that all depend on each other: heart brain, lungs. | A society has lots of different parts that all depend on each other: family system, educational system, economic system. |
| A body has basic needs: oxygen, food, shelter. | A society has basic needs (functional prerequisites) adaptation, integration, pattern maintenance, goal attainment). |
| Bodies, and other organisms, evolve over time. Changing and adapting to their environment. | Societies evolve over time, becoming more complex and specialised. |
| A body can become sick and ill: measles, broken arm. | A Society can become ‘sick’ : high crime rates, high divorce rates. |

By making this comparison, Durkheim thought we could understand society better by seeing it as a working system with lots of parts that fitted together to make up the whole. What holds the whole thing together is the dependence each part has on the other parts and the general agreement of people with the main ideas about how the society should be run, its **core values**.

*For example:*

A functionalist would say that in Britain today we have an education system because we need to integrate everyone into the same norms and values, we need to develop individuals so that they work well in society and we need a system for deciding which individuals should go into which positions in society. We need to make sure that the most able people are put in the most important positions for the good of all of us.

According to this theory, this system functions for the good of society as a whole and for the good of individual members. Most of the people, most of the time, value a good education. This is a core value in British society.

**Structural Theories 2.**

Some structural theorists say that the ‘rules’ that govern human social behaviour are based on **conflict**. They argue that the ‘rules’ which structure society are like they are because the most powerful people in society have managed to impose them on everybody else. And, that everybody else doesn’t always realise this.

One structural conflict theory is **MARXISM.**

Marxists say that the **economic system** (infrastructure) is the most basic system in any society. As an economic system develops some people become the owners of economic resources and others end up as paid workers. The owners want to increase profits by keeping wages down and the workers want to push wages up, therefore conflict is built into society.

Karl Marx (18 -19 ) argued that the other parts of society (superstructure), such as the family, education system, religion, legal system, and mass media, all operate in such a way as to support the inequality caused by the economic system. The family teaches you to work hard and accept authority, religion teaches you to accept your situation and look forward to rewards in the next life, the legal system focuses on the protection of property rights, and the mass media diverts your attention away from the inequality that is going on and seduces you into trivial concerns about football, soap stars, fashion, celebrity.

Karl Marx argued that people put up with the inequalities in society because they go through a socialisation process that teaches them that inequality is acceptable and legitimate. They are not protesting all the time because they are taught that they can do better if they work hard, and if they don’t succeed it must be their own fault.

*For example:*

A Marxist would say that the education system in Britain today is there to teach to values of the economic system (capitalism), and to ensure that the children of the powerful achieve high positions in society, while the children of the workers develop the necessary skills and attitudes to be good workers themselves. Those people who control the economic system want to maintain their power and increase their profits. The education system serves their needs and helps them achieve this.

According to this theory, society works in a way that supports the interests of the powerful. As these interests involve exploiting the not-so powerful, society is naturally in a state of conflict with different groups competing to gain more power and influence in society.

# Structural Theories 3

Another structural **conflict** theory is **FEMINISM**.

Feminists argue, in a similar way to Marxists, that society is built on conflict, because of the power of one group of people to impose their interests on the rest. However, Marxists say that the basis of power is the control of economic resources, whereas Feminists say that the basis of power is **masculinity**. A society in which men are the most powerful is described as a **patriarchy**.

 Feminism is a more recent theory in sociology because women were not able in the past to attend Universities, become researchers and academics, and challenge the male view of the world. Although women have been campaigning for equal rights for over one hundred year, it is only in the last forty years that academic feminism has become established, and women have taken more senior roles in the Universities.

Feminists argue that to understand human social behaviour it is essential to consider **gender** differences.

They define gender as the **learnt** characteristics that go along with the biological differences of male and female. They emphasise masculinity and femininity as **social** characteristics.

Feminists argue that women are systematically disadvantaged in comparison to men in society. They have less power to make decisions, on average they receive less pay, they own less property and they experience discrimination on the basis of their gender. There is an expectation that they will provide free domestic labour and be the main carers of the young, the old and the sick.

Feminists vary in their explanations as to why this is the case:

**Marxists Feminists** point to the connection between masculinity and the control of economic resources. They see the organisation of the economy as the cause of female disadvantage.

**Radical Feminists** say that female disadvantage suits the interests of men. Men do not want to give up their power and advantages so they maintain a society that gives inferior status to women, and defines femininity as weak and trivial.

**Liberal Feminists** are less critical of society and see female disadvantage as a result of historical ideas and gender socialisation. They focus more on the changes taking place in the roles of women and will also point to the fact that traditional masculine roles can be restrictive for men.

The main point all Feminists make is that society is **not** the same for women and men, and that gender differences need to be acknowledged.

# Social Action Theories 1

Social Action theories ( sometimes known as **Interpretivist** theories) all have in common the belief that society is constructed by the actions of its members. They do not see society as based on structures or ‘rules’ , but rather as the end result of people interpreting society around them.

**Max Weber** ( 1864-1920) challenged the structural theorists like Durkheim and Marx, by claiming that to understand human behaviour you had to have interpretive understanding (**verstehen**); you had to understand what the behaviour meant to the people involved in it.

 A social action theory that was developed from Weber’s ideas is **SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM.**

Symbolic Interactionism was developed by the sociologist **George Mead** (1863-1931). It is a theory about how we make sense of, and interpret, what is going on around us.

First it considers how we develop a **sense of self**. We interpret all the ‘messages’ we get from other people and develop a sense of ourselves with certain characteristics. The way other people interact with us, and the way we choose to respond, creates our social identity.

Once we have a sense of self we can put ourselves in ‘*someone else’s shoes’* and interpret their behaviour. If we see someone smiling and waving we can work out what it would mean if we were doing that, and then this gives us the ability to interpret the action.

According to this theory we are not carrying out the ‘rules’ we have learnt, but are monitoring behaviour through conscious thought.

We also make sense of the world around us by the use of symbols. **Symbols** are things that carry meaning, like for example: a red light means danger, the letters a p p l e mean a crunchy fruit, a handshake means a greeting, a uniform means certain occupational skills. We are interpreting these symbols all the time and our behaviour is the result of what we make of these symbols.

*For example:*

In the education system pupils are rewarded with coloured stars or grades which symbolise levels of achievement. Receiving a gold star on a piece of work will be interpreted by most pupils as praise and encouragement. It is this level of personal interaction that Symbolic Interactionists are interested in studying.

# Social Action Theories 2

Another social action theory is **LABELLING THEORY**

Labelling Theory focuses on the labels that get given to people by others in society and the impact of the labels on the way people behave. You may have been aware at secondary school of some pupils being labelled as ‘bright’, ‘reliable’ ,‘lazy’, ‘troublemakers’ by teachers in the school. These labels may, or may not, have had an impact on the way the pupils subsequently behaved.

The focus of labelling theory is less on the way people are able to construct their self image and more on the way an identity is **imposed** on them by others.

**Howard Becker** is the sociologist who has done the most to develop Labelling Theory. He was particularly interested in the drop-outs and petty criminals of America and the way that the labels they received affected the way they were treated by society. Becker was interested in the way more powerful people in society were able to apply labels to others. He studied the police and the legal system and researched how certain people became labelled as criminals and others avoided it.

**Erving Goffman** was interested in people who had received the label “mentally ill”. He looked at the way staff in institutions interacted with the label rather than the person themselves. Because this was happening, the person often accepted the role of a mentally ill person and slipped into ways of behaving that fitted in with the expectations of the staff.

**Rosenthal and Jacobson** looked at the impact of teacher expectations on the achievement of pupils. They visited a school and carried out tests on the children. They then selected a group of children at random and but told the class teacher that they were very bright with high potential. *They applied a label to the pupils*. One year later they revisited the school and discovered the pupils they had labelled as bright were doing better than those who had not been labelled, even though they were selected at random in the first place. The researchers described this effect as a ‘**self-fulfilling prophecy’**.

Becker has argued that some labels are so powerful that they give someone a **master status**, that is a status that affects every other status a person has. If someone is publicly labelled a sex offender, for example, this will affect their status as neighbour, employee, friend, husband.

Labelling theorists agree that people vary in the extent to which they have to accept labels and the extent to which they can **negotiate** their way out of them. Labelling is not a straightforward process. Not everyone who behaves in a certain way picks up the same label, the process is **variable**, as is the effect.

# Social Action Theories 3

There are two other theories, that take the same approach as the other social action theories, that you might see mentioned in the text books. These are:

PHENOMENOLOGY and

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY.

All you need to remember is that they are social action / interpretivist theories.

**PHENOMENOLOGY** is a philosophical perspective that basically says there is no reality beyond what we can experience. We will all have different experiences and see events slightly differently . There is no correct version of an event, only a collection of different peoples’ perceptions.

*For example:*

If you think of what is happening in the classroom now, everybody will be having a slightly different experience; because of where they are sitting in the room, whether they are hungry, tired etc., the angle at which they can see the teacher and the people they can see across the room. Everyone will have experienced a slightly different version of this lesson. No individual’s version is any more real than any others.

**ETHNOMETHODOLOGY** is an approach to understanding human behaviour which sees how people make sense of what is happening around them by disturbing their taken-for-granted assumptions.

*For example:*

A typical ethnomethodological experiment was set up by a sociologist called Harold Garfinkel who told his students to go home and behave as if they were lodgers in their own homes. They were not allowed to tell anyone why they were behaving in this way, and they had to make a note of peoples’ reactions. This experiment explores what happens when the normal pattern of interaction is disrupted and people have trouble interpreting what is going on around them.

As with all social action theories both these focus on the small-scale. The interest is in the details of how people interpret what is going on and make decisions about how to behave, To social action theorists understanding human social behaviour lies in examining these interactions.

**ANOTHER ‘THEORY’ !**

Here ‘Theory’ is placed in inverted commas because this ‘theory’ claims that society is now changing so much that we can’t have big theories (*grand narratives*) anymore to explain it.

This approach to society is described as **POSTMODERNISM.**

Postmodernists say that the old divisions and certainties which characterised societies in the past are now breaking down, so the traditional theories which tried to explain these societies are no longer any good for explaining the sort of society we have today.

For instance: postmodernists argue that people in society can no longer be divided into those that control economic resources and those that don’t. Economic life is now global, multinational companies are very powerful, and they are owned by many shareholders and controlled by paid managers. Many people who are wage earners are also share holders. There are also new economic divisions between those in secure work and those in temporary work, between those who work for a company, those who work for the government and those who work for themselves. All these changes mean that the **Marxist** analysis of society as divided into two competing classes is no longer relevant.

Postmodernists also argue that traditional gender roles are disappearing. They challenge **feminist** analysis which argues that women are disadvantaged relative to men. They argue that the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are no longer meaningful. As there are so many different types of women and so many different types of men, with such a variety of statuses, roles and life experiences, it is pointless lumping them all together into one category. The general statements feminists have made in the past about the roles of men and women no longer apply.

Equally postmodernists would challenge the **functionalist** argument that norms and values function for the good of society. They would argue that some norms might function well, at certain times, in some circumstances, but that it is impossible to have a general theory that explains everything.

As you can see it is the Structural theories that postmodernists disagree with the most, because these claim to explain society ‘*as a whole’*.

Many sociologists disagree with postmodernists and claim that there **are** structural forces in society that have an impact on human behaviour and need to be understood.