

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Revision Paragraphs for Year 13

Social Theory: Structure vs. Action

Structural Theories:

Structures in society affect individuals and determine our behaviour

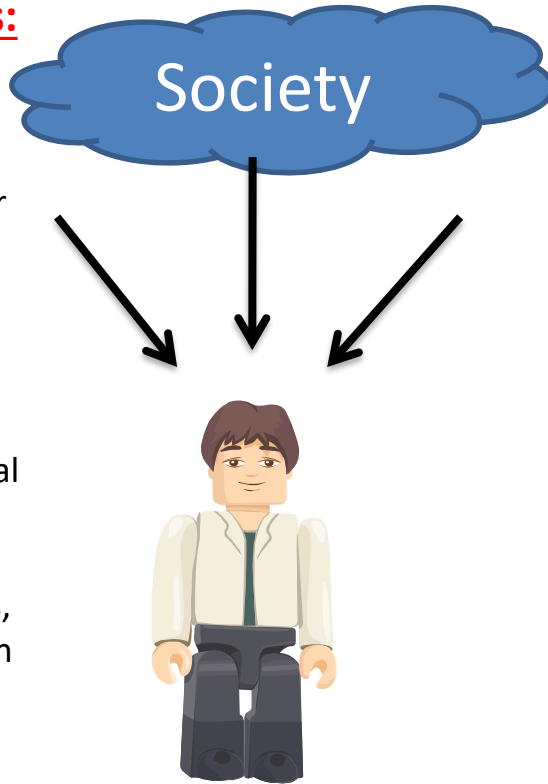
Macro, 'top-down'

E.g. Functionalism, Marxism and some Feminisms (liberal, radical and marxist)

Some, e.g. Functionalists, take a positivist approach to research as they believe society is something 'out there' that can be measured to establish patterns (social facts).

Example: Language

Rules of grammar and dictionaries of meanings set out our language as a shared culture that we use. This language can affect the way we think about the world and gives us a way to understand the world around us.



Action Theories:

Society is created through our individual actions. With every action, we create social meaning.

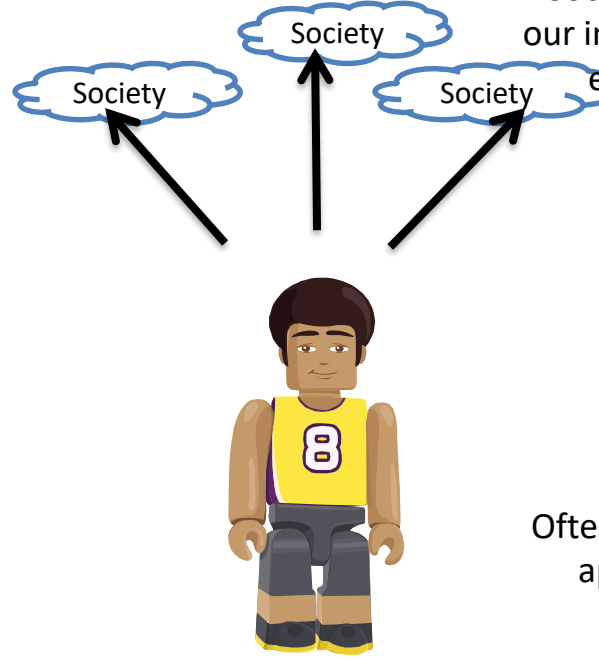
Micro, 'bottom-up'

E.g. Symbolic interactionism, Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology

Often take an interpretivist approach to research as they believe that it is sociologist's jobs to interpret social interactions.

Example: Language

Every time we use a word we negotiate the meaning of the word with the person we are speaking to. Language is therefore constantly being created in everyone's interactions. Language changes and adapts, but we have shared understanding through our ability to interpret each other's meaning.



Some approaches try to combine structure and action, e.g. Weber's Social Action Theory and Giddens' Structuration Theory.

Example: Language

We have rules or grammar which do exist outside the individual, but individuals choose who to use language are free to give words new meaning and create new rules.

Evaluate the usefulness of functionalism to our understanding of society today. [20 marks]

(P) According to Parsons, society is a social system; a society that is built up of different layers. **(E)** He suggests that individual actions are governed by social *norms* and these norms come in 'clusters' called *status-roles*. For example, the status of teacher; this status determines an individual's duties and responsibilities. **(A)** Status-roles come in clusters called *institutions*, e.g. schools. Institutions group together into *sub-systems*, e.g. The education system. From a functionalist perspective, this helps us understand society today because this idea explains how sub-systems make up the *social system* as a whole. **(C)** However, Functionalism assumes society runs with stability and order via these subsystems and doesn't account for today's diversity and instability.

Evaluate the usefulness of feminist contributions to our understanding of society today. [20 marks]

Connective –Feminism has many divisions and different feminists do not agree on many issues, however, most do agree on one thing; women are subordinated in modern society and this need to change.

(P) In contrast to Radical Feminist, liberal feminists generally focus on how social institutions such as the family, education, mass media encourage male exploitation of women. **(E)** They argue that these institutions function to ensure that gender role socialisation shapes men and women's behaviour according to patriarchal culture. They believe that by working within and improving the existing systems in society today and argue that equality can be brought about through legal reform. **(A)** For example; lobbying and protesting for equal pay and employment opportunities, which we see having an impact in society even today. A modern day example is, the introduction of 'Clare's Law' in 2014, which can help women find out if their partner has a history of domestic violence. **(C)** However, some radical feminists approach as being far too optimistic because there is still a evident gender pay gap and women are still much higher victim of domestic abuse, despite these policy changes.

‘Society has now entered a new postmodern age and we need new theories to understand it’. Evaluate this view. **[20 marks]**

(P) One factor that supports this view is the technological changes.

(E & A) An example of this can include how we can now pass continents in hours via a plane, also, how we can now exchange information through a click of a mouse (through social networking sites such as Instagram, Skype etc). The technological changes support the view that society has now entered a new stage postmodernity. This hugely contrasts with the pre-industrial society where the only two mode of transport was horses or by foot. In modern society, there was mass production of similar cars, plane travel only for the more higher or middle classes but in a postmodern society it accessible to all classes. **(C)** However, this technological view is criticised because some argue that it ignores the detrimental changes it does to society; as greenhouse gases are produced in one place contribute to global climate changes that results to a rise in sea levels and flooding in low-lying countries. Beck refers to this as a “risk society”.

(P) Baudrillard, a postmodernist, argues that knowledge is central to postmodern society **(E)** because society is no longer based on the production of material goods, but rather it is in the form of buying and selling knowledge in the form of images and signs. Baudrillard argues that society has now entered a “new postmodern age” because of the signs in past societies, those today bear no relation to physical reality. Instead, signs in postmodern society stand for nothing other than themselves – they are not symbols of some other real thing which he refers to as simulacra. **(A)** An example of where he highlights this is through the tabloid newspaper articles about fictitious soap opera characters are ‘signs about signs’ rather than about the underlying reality. He describes this situation as ‘hyper-reality’ because signs appear more real than the reality itself and so therefore substitute themselves for reality. **(C)** Yet, theories of late modernism will criticise Baudrillard because they see today’s society as a development of modern capitalist society, not the break of it, and that we use our knowledge to change it for the better.

Evaluate the view that values can and should be kept out of sociological research [20 marks]

(P) Positivists believe that sociology is a science. **(E)** Positivists claim that natural scientists do not allow their values to affect their research, so it follows that the same must be true for sociologists. What we would like to be true or what we think ought to be true is irrelevant. Therefore, positivists believe that only a value-free sociology is acceptable and if values do influence sociological research then that work is "tainted" by subjective feelings and no one else would find it useful or take it seriously. **(A)** This view suggests that sociology can and should be value free. **(C)** However, interpretivists would argue that human behaviour cannot be studied in the same way as the natural world because humans have feelings and meanings that will inevitably influence their research.

Evaluate the view that sociology can and should model itself on the natural sciences. **[20 marks]**

(P) One argument presented as to why sociology is a science comes from Positivists, and the reason given is due to the methods used.

(E) Positivists use quantitative data and methods such as questionnaires in order to distinguish any trends, patterns or correlations in an investigation. By adopting the methods of natural sciences they establish sociology as a real science. **(A)** For example, closed ended questionnaires or official statistics. Comte, who invented the term sociology, argued that it should be based on the methodology of the natural sciences. This would then result in a positive science of society which would in turn reveal the invariable laws. **(C)** However, interpretivist these ways of natural sciences creates difficult problems, as although it provides a guideline in which to conduct experiments, people and society cannot be treated as objects and therefore cannot be measured as such.

Evaluate the relationship between sociology and social policy. [20 marks]

(P) Marxist see the government as serving the interest of the ruling classes and they argue that social policies serve the interest of capitalism not society as a whole. **(E &A)** Marxists suggest that sociological research will only influence social policy if it serves the interest of capitalism, for example, the NHS keeps workers healthy and 'props up' capitalist economies. Furthermore, they argue that the government has the power to bury research that goes against their own ideology; the 1980 Black report and suggest that sociologists should be exposing the way the government use social policy to mask the capitalist oppression of the working classes. **(C)** However, functionalist would disagree because they believe the government serves the interest of society as a whole so will produce social policies for the good of all, not just for powerful groups.

(P) Many sociologists, particularly radical ones such as Marxists and feminists, believe that a major purpose of their work is to bring about social change through arousing awareness of inequalities. **(E)** Giddens, who is a government advisor on social policy, suggests that sociology can help to solve social problems in a variety of ways. Sociologists collect facts and derive theories about social situations such as poverty. They help us to understand and empathise with the problems of marginalised groups by describing their cultures and revealing stereotypes. **(A)** Published work by sociologists may encourage people such as women, gays and ethnic minorities to consider their experiences, roles and self-images (reflexivity) so that they can take action to improve their lives. An example of this was the 1980 Black Report highlighting the inequalities in health services. **(C)** On the other hand some sociology is motivated by the desire to expand human knowledge and understanding or to challenge widespread beliefs rather than to influence the organisation of social life. .