AS Sociology For AQA
[2nd Edition]

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Unit 0:
Introduction To Sociology

Contents

Introduction to Sociology: culture, roles, values and norms.

Defining Sociology: Observations

The first section of this AS textbook is designed to introduce students to both the general subject matter of Sociology (through a brief definitional section) and the "core themes" (socialisation, culture and identity) of the AQA AS course. These themes are developed in greater detail in the text's coverage of the different Modules and the general design of the AS Specification makes it necessary for students to think about how each core theme is integrated into the various Modules.

A visual representation of A Core - not a theme, as such, but the closest we could get (which, to be brutally frank, isn't very close at all)

For some Modules – such as Culture and Identity and, to a lesser extent Families and Households – this integration is fairly clear-cut (the former, for example, requires students to understand socialisation processes, agents of socialisation, concepts of culture and identity and the like while the latter requires students to think implicitly about the family as an agency of primary socialisation). Similarly, the Education Module requires students to apply ideas about secondary socialisation, the education system as a cultural institution and so forth.

Given that this Section is an Introduction to Sociology it's likely the ideas we've just mentioned won't mean that much to the majority of students studying sociology for the first time. However, they're important ideas that need to be grasped and we suggest that once you've finished reading through this section (when you'll have a much better idea about both Sociology and key concepts like culture, roles, values and norms) you

revisit the previous paragraph to ensure you've understood how the core themes relate to the Modules you're about to study.

Sociology is the study of human behaviour and relationships and a good "working definition" is provided by **Ritzer** (1979) when he suggests: "Sociology is the study of individuals in a social setting that includes groups, organisations, cultures and societies. Sociologists study the interrelationships between individuals, organisations, cultures and societies".

Sociology, in this respect, involves studying human beings and their *patterns of behaviour* and to do this sociologists focus on the relationships people form (such as between parents and children or teachers and students) and how these are interconnected (how, for example, does our relationship with our parents impact on our relationship with friends?). In other words, the focus of attention is **group behaviour** and, more specifically, how membership of social groups (such as families and schools) impacts on individual behaviour – an idea we can start to develop by thinking about the largest group to which most of us probably feel we "belong", namely a:

Society: One key feature of this concept is that people see themselves as having "something in common" with the other members of "their society" – and, by extension perhaps, as seeing themselves as being different to members of "other societies". In this respect, different societies can be considered to occupy two types of *space*:

1. Physical **Space** in the sense of a distinctive **geographical area** marked by either a *physical border* (such as a river) or a *symbolic border* (an imaginary line, for example, marking where one society ends and another begins).

2. Mental **Space** – the various beliefs we hold about the similarities we have with those who belong to "our society" and the differences between us and people who belong to a different society. We can express these ideas in terms of two significant concepts:

Firstly, the concept of **culture** which, in general terms, refers to a distinctive "way of life" characteristic of a particular society.

Secondly, the concept of **identity** – a sense that we both know "who we are" and, by extension, "who we are not". In this particular context we're talking about a sense of **national** and **cultural** identity but, as we will see, there are many other types and sources of identity.

If you think for a moment about the idea of "a society" (or any social group, come to that) it should become apparent that even its *physical characteristics* are actually *mental constructs*; that is, they are "in reality" just names we give to something in order to describe and make sense of it. The physical borders of societies, for example, may change over time and if you think about the border between, say, England and Scotland it is, when all's said and done, just a line on a map. A "physical border" exists – and is understandable to us – because we (individually and collectively) give it a particular *meaning*. **Anderson** (1983) captures the flavour of this idea when he uses the concept of an:

Imagined community: A "society" is an imagined community "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.". We can extend this idea to social groups generally to argue that, just as each of us *imagines* we belong to that community we call "our society", we also *imagine* we belong to social groups (such as a family) within that society. We can develop this idea by thinking about how and why we imagine ourselves to be part of a community:

Relationships: Whenever we enter into a relationship with someone - either through choice or necessity - we create an *invisible bond*. For example, when you say something like "That person is my friend" you recognise some kind of special relationship between the two of you. This relationship is different to the one created when you say something like "That person is my mother". There are many hundreds – if not thousands - of different social relationships we could identify if we had the time and inclination; some of these are *personal* ("This is my boy / girlfriend") and some are *impersonal* (such as when you watch television). However, the important thing here is they all affect our behaviour in some way because we behave towards other people *as if* these relationships are real (which, in a sense, they are for as long as we believe they are).

The purpose of thinking in this way about relationships is to get you thinking sociologically, in the sense that if the social world is not *physically real*, but *mentally real* it follows we cannot be born with a knowledge of "society" and human relationships. We're not, for example, born knowing our society's history or geography, its music, language, customs and traditions. Neither, of course, do we know how and to whom we are related. The fact that we develop a

knowledge and understanding of these things suggests that what's important here are two things:

Nature: As human beings we're born with the *capacity* to learn.

Nurture: We can exploit our *ability* for learning to create an incredibly complex "way of life" (a culture) filled with a wide variety of different relationships.

For sociologists, therefore, *cultural behaviour* is *learned behaviour* and we can explore some of the basic ideas behind this concept by thinking about *what* we learn and *how* we learn it.

Defining Sociology: Explanations

Our personal experience of the social world tells us that life is not simply a series of random, purposeless or unstructured events. Wherever we look we're surrounded by *patterns of behaviour*, some of which have a long history (family groups, for example, have been a feature of our society for thousands of years), others of which have a history far shorter than we might imagine (compulsory State education, for example, is only something that has really taken root in our society over the past 50 years).

The fact that *institutionalised behaviour* exists (a **social institution**, such as the family, marriage, the education system and so forth, can be simply understood as a "*pattern of shared, stable, behaviour*") suggests it must have a *cause* – something that encourages people to behave in ways which, while not necessarily entirely predictable, are "predictable enough" on a general day-to-day basis (we know, for example, that we may "go to school" or "go to work" each day, without necessarily knowing exactly what we will be doing once we get there). We can start to think about the "causes of human behaviour" in two basic ways – non-sociologically, in terms of the concept of **instinct** and sociological in terms of the concept of **culture**.

Instinct

The idea that human beings have "instincts" that guide their behaviour is a fairly common one in our society, for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, we tend to be taught that animal behaviour is guided by instincts (by which, for the moment, we generally mean to be some sort of genetic programming that tells animals how to behave without their having to think about such behaviour). Since people are essentially animals too, it's only a short step to believe that some – if not necessarily all – human behaviour has a similar instinctive basis.

Babies - cute maybe, but not exactly the brightest stars in the night sky are they?

Secondly, the concept is frequently used in our everyday language. For example, we hear or use phrases like "The striker's instinct for goal" or "She seemed to instinctively know they were talking about her". This everyday-usage gives it a *taken-for-granted* quality, through which it enters the realm of "what everybody knows" (it becomes, in effect, part of our common sense store of knowledge).

Whatever the merits of using the concept of instinct in the context of explaining the behaviour of cats, dogs and frogs, the usefulness of the concept– when applied to an understanding of human behaviour – is one that tends to be questioned by sociologists and to understand why this should be the case we need to be clear about its meaning.

Instincts have three main features; they tell an animal *what* to do, *when* to do it and, finally, *how* to do it. To clarify these ideas, consider this (admittedly a little bizarre) example from the bird world:

Kittens - even cuter than babies but total non starters in the intelligence stakes?

What: Every year for as long as I can remember, blue tits have nested in my garden, in the bird box I've so thoughtfully provided for them (except, I should add, when my garden was being redesigned and I took the box down – they nested in my barbeque instead). This is evidence of instinctive behaviour because the adult blue tits know what they've got to do each year.

When: Aside from nesting every year, the blue tits also know at what point in the year to start nest-building, egg-laying and chick-rearing. Again, this is instinctive behaviour because it doesn't have to be taught or learned – they just seem to know when to start nesting.

How: Without fail, these birds build exactly the same sort of nest each year (a single-story "everyone-in-it-together" affair). This, again, is instinctive behaviour because the adult birds have no choice in the matter – they build the type of nest they've been genetically-programmed to build.

Or Culture?

In terms of our "bird world" example, sociologists tend to be sceptical about the idea of instinct as the basis for human behaviour, for three main reasons:

Choice: Instincts, by definition, involve a lack of choice (their purpose, after all, is to create order by explicitly removing choice from the agenda). Human behaviour, on the other hand, involves an almost limitless set of choices, some of which are fairly banal ("Should I do my Sociology homework or watch TV?") and some of which aren't ("Should I buy this very interesting book or

steal it from the bookshop?"). The fact we are able to make behavioural choices, contributes to the:

Diversity of our behaviour: One of the fascinations of Sociology (I'm certain there are others, but as I'm writing this none jump immediately to mind) is the fact that people develop different (or diverse) ways of doing things. If human behaviour was simply based on instinct we would expect to see much the same sort of behaviour wherever we were in the world - and while there are numerous similarities and continuities in people's behaviour, there are also a vast range of differences that stem from our ability to make choices.

Adaptation: We live in a vast and complex world that is constantly changing and people need to be able to adapt to such changes. A simple example to illustrate this idea might be the recent and rapid development of computer technology that, through things like the Internet, is changing the way people both see the world and interact in that world. Instinctive behaviour is, as we've suggested, something that does not and cannot change. If human behaviour was guided by instinct, therefore, we would find it difficult (if not impossible) to either initiate or adapt to change…

Before we move on to consider an alternative explanation for the underlying causes of human behaviour (cultural learning) we can note, by way of clarification, a further concept, frequently confused with the idea of instinct:

Biological drives are those aspects of human behaviour that are biologically desirable or necessary - examples of which might include eating and sleeping, We should note that even though such drives are part of our biological make-up, they can be regulated though our social experiences (in other words, we may exercise some degree of *choice* about when and how we do them). Eating, for example, can be regulated through dieting and sleep patterns can be fairly-easily adjusted, depending on social circumstances (new-born babies in our society, for example, are slowly taught when to go to sleep and when to stay awake).
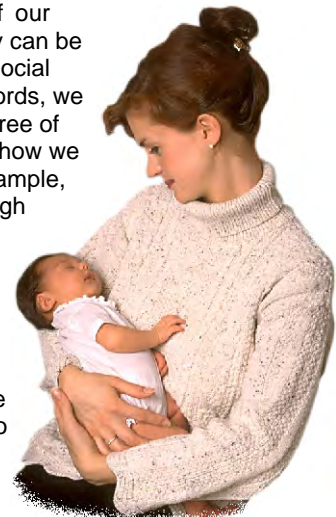
This slight digression into the realm of instinct is useful in the sense that it allows us to contrast this type of explanation with sociological explanations for patterned human behaviour that focus on the general idea of culture as a type of shorthand for learned behaviour. In this respect the idea of culture as a "way of life" refers, for our present purpose, to the general way human behaviour is patterned and although different people at different times and in different places may behave in quite different ways (for reasons we explore in the **Culture and Identity** Module), the general principle that this behaviour is structured holds true. In other words, human cultural development follows a set of very

general and very basic "rules" that have to be both taught and learned by generations of individuals.

Cultural Learning: Observations

The first point to note here is that if behaviour is learned, it follows it must also be taught – which leads to the idea our membership of social groups is the initial key to understanding behaviour sociologically. We need, therefore, to understand the concept of a *social group* and how belonging to groups affects our behaviour. As you probably appreciate from your prior cultural learning, there are various types of social group we can identify. These include:

Family groups, consisting of people related to each other through *kinship* (a direct biological relationship – such as mother and daughter) or *affinity* (their relationship is by marriage or some other living arrangement).

Educational groups, which could include people studying together in the same school / college or class.

Work groups - people who do the same type of job, for example.

Peer groups*,* consisting of people of roughly the same age (*teenagers*, for example) who share common interests, such as music and fashion.

Our individual lives, therefore, are surrounded by social groups – some of which we actively join and others we may merely observe. Their significance to us, however, needs to be considered in terms of how membership of these groups affects two things:

The peer group - frightening to think these people might be connected to you, isn't it?

Firstly, how we think about the social world (our personal "sociological perspective") and,

Secondly, how we behave (in other words, how our behaviour is both learned from and shaped by the behaviour of others). Cultural learning, in this respect, is a two-way process (my behaviour towards you affects your behaviour towards me which, in turn, affects how I behave towards you…).

We can start to illustrate and develop these general ideas by returning briefly to the concept of society we noted earlier, for two main reasons. Firstly, because it allows us to illustrate one of the problems faced by sociologists in their attempt to explain human behaviour and secondly because it allows us to explore and explain the concept of cultural learning in more detail.

If we accept **Anderson's** (1983) idea that society is an "imagined community" it both helps us to understand the various dimensions (or indicators) of "a society" and highlights a potential problem. In the case of the former, for example, "a society", as we've suggested, has a number of physical and mental dimensions which, for the sake of illustration, include things like:

Geographic boundaries (as we've previously noted).

Government, which may involve things like a monarchy, parliament and civil service, for example.

Language, **customs** and **traditions** which people within a society share (speaking the same language, for example, or celebrating a particular religious festival).

Identity: We develop an awareness that "our society" is different to other societies and "We", in turn, consider ourselves different to "Them" (for example, the English may see themselves as different to French or American people).
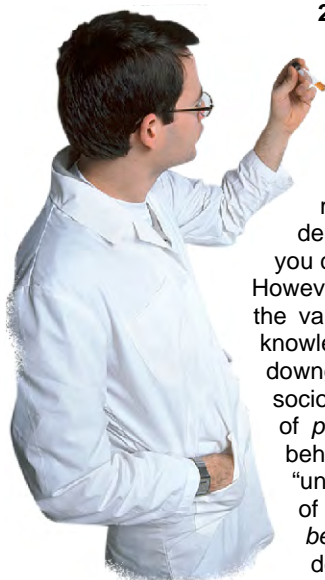
It's not just a language difference...

The problem, as far as sociologists are concerned, is that these indicators point to something that doesn't actually have a physical existence. "Society", in other words, can't be seen, smelt, touched, tasted or heard (even those aspects that have a physical existence – such as a geographic border – are, as we've suggested, just another aspect of our vivid imaginations; borders, for example, can be moved (through warfare and conquest) so that a physical feature of the landscape that marked a border yesterday is no-longer a marker today).

The border between Tanzania and Kenya...

This problem, as you might imagine, has a couple of consequences relating to:

1. Arguments: Our inability to point to something solid and say "This is society" means sociologists have developed different opinions about the nature of society - how it's organised or how it affects our behaviour, for example. In addition, not all sociologists agree about how to define "society" or, indeed, how it can or should be studied.

2. Knowledge: Sociologists are often accused of not being "real" scientists (unlike Physicists or Chemists, for example). Whether this matters probably depends on how important you consider this *status* to be. However, it does tend to mean the value of sociological knowledge is generally downgraded, mainly because sociologists seem incapable of *predicting* human behaviour. Whether this "unpredictability" is a quality of *Sociology* or of *human behaviour* is a matter for debate (and not one we need to venture into at present).

A Real Scientist, doing Something Very Important. Saving millions of lives. Probably.

For the moment, we can note there are plenty of things in the natural world that can be studied without the scientist being able to physically or personally sense them. Gravity, electricity, radiation and oxygen, for example, are all things we know exist, but they are not things you could easily pick-up and physically examine. The important point here, therefore, is we know these things exist (or, if you prefer, we can *theorise* their existence) not because we can physically sense them but because we can *feel* their *effects*.

This is a significant idea because it starts us thinking about something like "society" in terms of it being a *force*, rather than a physical object – just like, to take an example from the natural world, gravity is a force rather than a "thing". We can't see it, but we know it's there because we feel its effect. In a similar way, if we think about society as an invisible force, it should be possible to study its effects and, by so doing, demonstrate it's existence.

What norms surround the relationship between adults and children in our society?

Cultural Learning: Explanations

We can develop our ideas about the "invisible forces" that act upon us as human beings by thinking in terms of the concept of **culture** and how it is learned through a process of **socialisation**.

> **Module Link**　　　　　**Culture and Identity**
>
> The concepts of **culture** and **socialisation** are discussed in much more detail in the context of culture and identity and it would be useful to read through these sections even if you're going to study Families and Households (which involves explicit reference to socialisation) or Wealth, Poverty and Welfare as your Unit 1 option.

We can start by thinking about **culture** in terms of *what* we need to learn as part of the process of developing as a human individual and about **socialisation** as *how* we learn these things. In this respect, the idea of being born into - and living in - a society is an important one, not simply because this happens to be true (everyone is born into an existing society) but also because it suggests "a society" involves some sort of organisation. In other words, for a society to exist it must have *order* and *stability* and for these to exist people's behaviour must display *patterns* and *regularities* – ideas we can initially understand in terms of:

Culture: At its most basic, a culture is, as we've already noted, a "way of life". It consists, in other words, of the behaviour and beliefs that characterise people of different societies and we can initially identify three major aspects or dimensions of culture:

1. **Social Institutions**: We can think about "our culture" (or indeed any culture) in terms of general patterns of behaviour based around four different categories: politics, economics, family life and culture (which includes areas like education and religion). The technical term for these large-scale, persistent ("long-term") patterns of behaviour is a social institution and these organised patterns of behaviour represent one important dimension of social order and stability.

2. **Norms**: When we think about "typical" forms of behaviour (such as going to school or working) we are referring to *norms* (short for normative or normal) These can be defined as expected forms of behaviour in a given situation. For example, it might be a norm in our education system for students to sit quietly and listen when their teacher is talking to the class. Norms contribute to a sense of social order and stability because they represent behavioural rules others expect us to follow in particular situations and social spaces (such as the classroom, the workplace, the street and so forth).

3. Values: When we think about beliefs associated with institutions and norms (such as the belief someone is "innocent until proven guilty") we are expressing a *value* - a belief about the way something *should* be. Thus, when you catch yourself saying what you believe someone *should* - or indeed *should not* - do, this is evidence of your values. Again, values are a significant dimension to order and stability because they represent general ideas about how people in a particular society or social group should behave.

> **Module Link**   **Culture and Identity**
>
> This Module examines different aspects of culture (**material** and **non-material** in particular) in more depth.

So far we've touched on the idea of societies and cultures being characterised by certain behavioural patterns. The main question to address next, therefore, is that if we are all individuals, unique in our own small ways, and without instincts to guide us, how is it possible for these patterns of behaviour to exist?

> **Module Link**   **Culture and Identity**
>
> This Module looks in more depth at various aspects of the **socialisation** process – **primary** and **secondary** forms in particular. You should familiarise yourself with these general ideas because they will make the remaining ideas in this section more understandable.

We can develop these dimensions of culture in more detail by thinking about how we learn the rules of cultural behaviour – something that involves a general process of **socialisation**.

For sociologists, the answer to this question is behaviour patterns are culturally created; that is, individual behaviours are shaped by the groups – and culture – to which we belong and with which we identify and this "shaping process", created through different forms of socialisation, involves thinking about how the rules of cultural behaviour are expressed through three key initial concepts – **roles**, **values** and **norms** – we can briefly explore in the following terms:

> **Social Roles**

The concept of **role** is one borrowed from the theatre in that it refers to the idea of "playing a part"; just as an actor "performs a role" in a play, people take on and perform various roles (student, sister, brother, friend, employee and so forth) in their day-to-day life – ideas that come together quite neatly in **Shakespeare's** (c.1598) famous observation that:

> "All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players:
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts".

Roles are a basic building block of any culture because they give us a sense of how we are *expected* to behave in any given social situation - think, for example, about how a teacher is *expected* to behave in relation to a student (and *vice versa*) – and because of the idea of common expectations they provide order and predictability in our relationships. This follows because role-play is governed by certain behavioural rules (sometimes termed a *prescribed aspect* of a role – general beliefs about how you *should* behave when playing a particular role) that involve, as we'll see in a moment, things like **values** and **norms**. Sociologists generally distinguish between two **types of role**:

Achieved roles are those we *choose* or are *allowed* to play – but we need to have done something to earn the right to play that role. You might, for example, only be allowed to play the role of an "A-level Sociology student" if you have the required GCSE qualifications, whereas playing the role of "friend" will involve a quite different set of "qualifications".

Ascribed roles, on the other hand, are roles we are *given* or *forced* to play by other, (usually more powerful) people. An example here might be the role of a son or daughter since it is "chosen for us" by our parents (we are given the role at the moment of our birth, depending on our biological sex). However, just to add a slight complication here, some types of ascribed role (such as mother or father) have an element of choice, whereas others (such as "slave" or "elderly") do not.

As we've suggested, role play is a source of order and predictability in our cultural relationships because by playing roles we establish some basic ground rules for people's behaviour (I expect, for example, the checkout operator at super my local market to make me pay for the things I buy, just as they expect me to pay for such things) and without them the social world would be a very confusing place - imagine, for example, a situation in which you could not remember what your relationship to everyone around you was supposed to be.

Another happy shopper celebrates successfully negotiating the normative minefield that is Tesco's on a Friday evening.

One benefit of role play, therefore, is that once we've learned what's expected of us in particular situations, we can use that knowledge whenever we play that role - mainly because it helps us accomplish certain tasks. Teaching and learning, for example, is made easier if both teacher and student behave towards each other in ways appropriate to their roles (think about how difficult it is to learn if the teacher is unable to stop students

misbehaving in the classroom). This example illustrates a further quality of roles, namely that of a:

Role-set: Any given role we take-on is generally played out in the context of other, related, roles attached to it. For example, in the role of student you may well play this role (slightly differently in each instance perhaps) in relation to a rage of other roles:

• Students in your Sociology class / school / college.
• Students in other subject classes.
• Your class teacher.
• Other teachers.
• Caretaking staff
• Administration staff.
• Your parent(s) / guardian(s)

How you play the role of student relative to others in your role-set will be conditioned, to some extent, by the concept of:

Social status, an idea that refers to the "level of respect we're expected to give someone when playing a particular role". Different roles have different statuses and different levels of status apply to different people within a role-set (the status of a student, for example, may be generally similar to that of other students in a class, but different to that of the class teacher). As with the concept of role, we can identify two basic **types of status**:

1. Achieved statuses involve doing something to earn that position - a teacher's status is earned, for example, because they have achieved the level of qualification and training necessary to play this role.
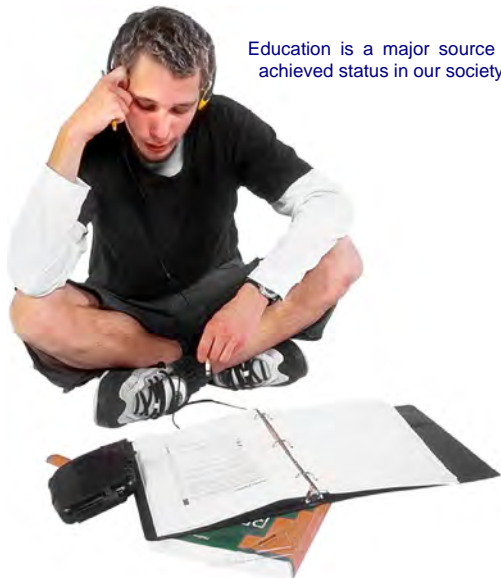
Education is a major source of achieved status in our society.

2. Ascribed statuses, on the other hand, are given to you by others (whether you want them or not). An example here might be a teacher's judgment about whether you are a "good" or "bad" student.

Although we play roles because they help us both understand and organise our behaviour in particular situations, the wide variety of roles we play occasionally causes us problems:

Role conflict occurs when the demands (or rules) of one role prevent us from behaving in accordance with the demands of another role. Imagine, for the sake of illustration, you play two roles in your life:

1. A *student role* that, to play successfully, means you have to be in class at 3pm on a Friday.

2. An *employee role* that means you have to start work at 2pm on a Friday.

Role conflict occurs because it is impossible for you to successfully combine these two roles. If you obey the demands of the student role you cannot conform to the demands of the employee role (and *vice versa*).

Norms

A *norm* refers to a socially acceptable way of behaving when playing a role. As the word suggests there are certain behaviours we *take for granted* (or consider *normal*) in particular situations when playing particular roles (every role, for example, has a number of different norms attached to it). It is, for example, the norm in our culture for an employee to be paid by their employer for the work they do, just as it is the norm for a school to have set times when staff and students should be present. We can note three basic types of norm:

Folkways (or informal norms) are a weak kind of norm; if you break them, the *sanctions* (penalties) involved are fairly minor. Folkways relate mainly to social politeness and customs. For example, when you meet someone you know it's polite to greet them ("Hello") and expect them to respond in kind. Similarly, it's customary in our culture to send people birthday cards. In many ways folkways are examples of *situational norms* - they only apply in specific situations. Your failure to send me a birthday card is unlikely to worry me unduly, for the deceptively simple reason I don't know you (it might have been nice if you'd made the effort though); your failure to remember a loved one's birthday, on the other hand, is likely to result in some sort of penalty…

Categories such as age, gender and ethnicity are examples of ascribed statuses

Mores (pronounced "more-rays") are stronger norms and a failure to conform to them will result in a consequently stronger social response from whoever resents your failure to behave appropriately. In some ways it's useful to think of them as *rules* relating to particular situations, such as joining the queue at a bus stop, for example, or a rule that bans talking in an exam (behaviour that in another situation would not be considered deviant).

Laws are the strongest norms in any society; they are expressions of moral feelings that exist to explicitly control people's behaviour. Punishment for breaking legal norms varies in terms of their perceived seriousness. In our society, punishments vary from things like community orders and fines to life imprisonment (although in some societies, such as America or Saudi Arabia, capital punishment may be the most extreme sanction for breaking this type of norm).

Norms, in general, are *specific behavioural guidelines* for playing a role; they are, if you like, the basic rules of behaviour we develop and use to perform roles predictably and acceptably. We don't, of course, have to obey norms (but we lay ourselves open to various penalties – or *social sanctions* - if we don't) and they're not necessarily hard-and-fast. **Goffman** (1959), for example, argues that norms are frequently open to *negotiation* - people playing related roles may be able, for example, to discuss the norms that will apply to their respective roles (going back to the role conflict example, this might be resolved by the student negotiating with the teacher to be excused class on the basis they promise to catch up with any work missed).

A further dimension to the idea of negotiation is that it may be possible to play the same role (such as a student) differently in different situations. For example, when attending one class the teacher may interpret their role narrowly, enforcing all kinds of rules and restrictions (working in silence, for example). However, in a different class the teacher may interpret their role very broadly, allowing their students to behave in ways unacceptable to the first teacher – an idea leads us to the related concept of:

Values

Our values reflect beliefs about what is important, both to us as individuals and to our society as a whole; as such, they are strongly related to both *roles* (how, for example, people should - or indeed shouldn't - behave when playing a particular role) and *norms*; if the latter are *specific* behavioural guidelines, **values** provide very *general* behavioural guidelines or, as **Thio** (1991) puts it: "*While norms are specific rules dictating how people should act in a particular situation, values are general ideas that support the norm*". Values, by definition, always involve *judgements* about behaviour; whenever we think about - or express - the values we hold we're choosing to believe one thing rather than another.

Proxemic Theory

We can illustrate the idea of *cultural learning* (and show how the concepts of roles, values and norms are inter-related into the bargain) using the concept of *Proxemic theory* – the study of the various ways people understand and use space in a cultural context - originally developed by **Hall** (1966). In this respect, although we are all born with the ability to understand notions of space (our eyes, for example, are positioned in such a way as to create three-dimensional images that our brains have the ability to process accurately) **Hall** argued that different cultures create different ways of "seeing space" – the most familiar example, for our current purpose perhaps, being the idea of **personal space** (although it's possible to look beyond the individual to understand how whole societies organise and utilise space in culturally-specific ways – in terms of things like urban development, housing, transport and so forth).

Personal space can be defined in terms of an area (or "bubble") that surrounds each of us which has a couple of important characteristics:

Firstly, the extent of our personal space varies both *between* cultures (in countries like England or the United States, for example, people generally like to maintain a greater sense of personal distance from others than they do in countries like France or Brazil) and *within* cultures – such as gender differences in our society (two women talking to each other, for example, tend to maintain less personal space between them than two men in the same situation).

Secondly, the space that surrounds us is considered to be "our property" and entry into it is regulated in various ways – something we can relate to different roles, values and norms using **Hall's (1996)** classic example of "strangers waiting for a train".

Maintaining personal space in public situations

When waiting for a train at a railway station we are (for the sake of illustration) playing the *role* of "stranger" to the people who are also waiting for the train to arrive. In this situation the role, as with any other role we play, is surrounded by certain *values* (beliefs, as we've seen, about how we should play this role). In our culture there are a range of values that apply (we should not behave towards strangers as if they were our closest friend in

the world, for example) and in this particular example one of the values we bring to bear is that of privacy and, more specifically, the notion of personal space as a way of maintaining privacy. In other words, when playing the role of stranger we value the cultural concept of privacy, both for our own purposes and those of others.

In this respect we understand that privacy is an important concept in our culture and we should not act in ways that invade – uninvited – the privacy of others (just as we expect them not to invade our privacy).

One way this value (or general behavioural guideline) is expressed is through various norms (or specific behavioural guidelines) that apply in particular situations. In this instance, one norm that reflects the role of stranger and the value of privacy is that we do not sit too close to strangers; we do not, in short, invade their personal space.

The ideas we've introduced in this opening section form the basis for a wider understanding of Sociology in the sense that they reflect two significant ideas. Firstly the concept of **social structures** (the idea that social life is structured by rules) and secondly the concept of **social action** (the idea that people can make choices about their behaviour – which rules to follow and which to break for example). We can, therefore, build on this work by developing a couple of ideas:

Firstly, the relationship between "the individual" (as a thinking, acting, being) and "society" (considered in terms of rules designed to guide people's behaviour).

Secondly, the different ways sociologists see and study social behaviour. In other words, the different sociological *perspectives* associated with different groups of sociologists in their attempts to understand and explain people's behaviour.

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Sociological Perspectives

Structure and Action: Observations

The first of these ideas is sometimes characterised as a debate between "*social structure*" and "*social action*" theory– a difference of interpretation that focuses on a central problem for sociologists - the relationship, as we've suggested, between the individual and society:

The Individual: On the one hand we are all individuals, each with our particular histories, hopes, fears and aspirations. We are all uniquely different, not just from our fellow human beings but also, as a species, from all other animals – and the thing we each possess that confers this uniqueness is *consciousness* - our ability to think (both about ourselves and our relationship to others) in ways more highly developed than in any other animal.

The ability to think is both a blessing and a curse; the former because it enables us to create complex technologies (the microwave oven!) and relationships (my mother's sister's brother's aunt's child…) and the latter because, in a sense, we are all prisoners of our own individuality - we can never really know what other people are thinking. We can, of course, make educated guesses (based on how someone talks to you, their body language and so forth), but we can never know for sure…

The Group: On the other hand we all live in a large social group we call a society. Although all societies are different, one of the striking things about human behaviour is that, for all our unique individuality, we do a surprising number of things with a regularity and general predictability that can't just be the result of accident or chance. Something, in other words, forces us to behave in routinely predictable ways (going to school; going to work; going shopping…) and for sociologists that "thing" is *social structure*.

What sociologists have to do, therefore, is to note the fact of human individuality (and our ability to act in almost any way we care to imagine) and square it with human predictability (the fact our behaviour is generally characterised by almost mundane similarities) – and this is where the concept of *structure* and *action* come into the equation.

Are we prisoners of our own individuality?

Feeling the Force

Social Structure: It sometimes helps to visualise a social structure as a "*framework of rules*" - a rule being something you're supposed to obey and a framework being the way such rules are created, maintained and policed. We can illustrate the general principles behind this idea by thinking about how your everyday behaviour is governed by laws - we can talk about a *legal framework* (or structure, if you prefer) involving: the government making laws (formal, legal rules), a police force enforcing these rules, a judicial system deciding whether or not you've broken the law and prisons in which to lock you up if you're judged to be guilty. The idea of a *legal structure* is a good way of thinking generally about the concept of a social structure, for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, even though we may never personally "break the law" or become subject to the power of the legal system this doesn't mean that our behaviour is not influenced by the existence of legal rules; on the contrary, I may *consciously* choose not to break the law precisely because I understand the possible consequences of such a course of action.

Secondly, while we can't actually see, smell or hear a "legal rule" (because it has no real, physical, existence) we know such rules exist if (or when) we experience their effect. We may, for example, personally experience the (police) force of the law if we are caught stealing something from a shop – although the majority of us probably only experience legal structures "second hand" through the behaviour of others (reading about what has happened to people who have broken the law, for example).

Keeping this idea in mind, if you think about the variety of ways your behaviour is governed by informal rules

(norms), the idea of a social structure surrounding you and your behaviour should become a little clearer.

All our relationships are based around roles.

Every relationship you enter into (such as with family, school, work and friends) involves playing a role, which in turn involves values relating to the role and, of course, norms associated with the role; every time you play a role, therefore, you are experiencing (however unwittingly) the effect of social structures – rules which shape your potential behavioural choices.

Social Action: If the concept of social structures focuses on how behaviour is governed by rules designed to constrain (limit) and control, the associated concept of *social action* focuses on our ability to make *choices* about how to behave. Just as, for example, we make choices about such things as who will be our friends, so too, ultimately we can make choices about the rules we obey or disobey - although, because we're talking about social structures there may well be consequences, in the form of **negative social sanctions** (punishments), for choosing to disobey.

Be that as it may, the important point – regardless of how "society" or people try to influence our behaviour - is we always have a *choice* about how to behave. To put this another way, in terms of social action our choices are potentially unlimited – we are free to act in whatever way we choose. However, our actual choices about how to behave are limited by the effects of social structures – by the framework of rules that characterise our relationships, our culture and our society.
This early in the course the introduction of these quite complex ideas can be a little daunting, but we can make things a little clearer by using an *analogy* (identifying and comparing the features of something we know a lot about to something we know little or nothing about).

If, therefore, we liken society to a game such as chess - although you could use any game with which you're familiar (Football, Battleships, Connect 4, Twister…), it can help us understand the relationship between structure and action in the following way:

Structure: Thinking about chess, for example, we know it has certain *physical boundaries* (the playing area). It also has *rules* governing how the game is played: these are both *technical* (relating to the basic mechanics of the game - the starting position of each playing piece, how different pieces are allowed to move, taking it in turn to move and so forth) and *cultural* (it's a competitive situation, with the main objective being to beat your opponent). This represents the basic structure of the game – or, if you prefer, the basic *framework of rules* within which the game is played.
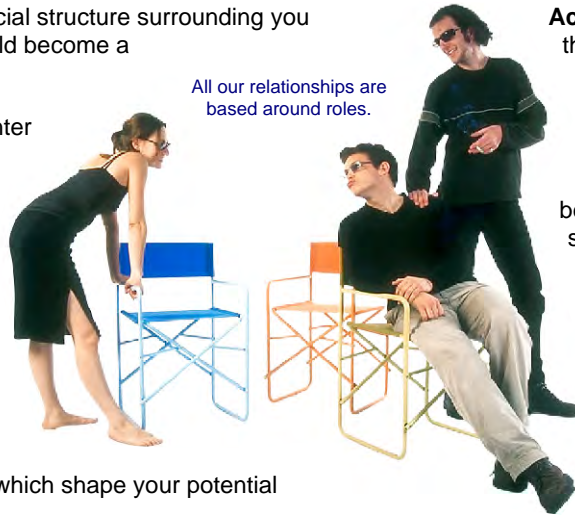
Action: Each player can choose their own particular *strategies* and *moves*, based on an assessment of how to successfully play the game. In chess, therefore, structure and action come together in that each player's behaviour (action) is limited, in some ways by:

Rules: If one player decides to change or break the rules, their opponent will react to this deviant act in some way (by protesting or refusing to continue playing, for example).

Conditions: Each player must, in this competitive environment, take note of how　　their opponent is playing - by responding to certain moves or moving in ways that produce particular responses from their opponent.

Structure and Action: Explanations

We can dig deeper into concepts of structure and action by both developing them in more detail and exploring the relationship between the two ideas.

Social Action: **Weber** (1922) drew an important distinction between the concepts of *behaviour* and *action* on the basis that behaviour becomes action when it is directed towards other people in such a way that it takes account of how others act. If this is a little unclear, think about the following ideas:

• **Behaviour**: **Weber** argued the animal world was governed by *behaviour*, rather than action because animal behaviour is not based on any understanding of how it might affect other animals. When a dog barks, for example, it does not understand how this behaviour affects other dogs or indeed other animals.

• **Action**: The social world, on the other hand is, for **Weber**, governed by action. Whenever we act, we do so in the knowledge of how our behaviour might impact on people at whom the action is directed. For example, whenever you have a conversation you're engaging in *social action* because you're interacting – how you behave is influenced by how the other person behaves and vice versa.

In this respect, social action involves a range of things that simple behaviour excludes. For example, it involves:

Your move?

Meanings: Whatever we say or do means something to both ourselves and others. When I'm getting ready to boogie-on-down at the local disco on a Friday night after a hard week teaching, for example, I choose what clothes to wear carefully. This is because I aim to make an impression on my disco-buddies – my choice of clothes has meaning to both me ("How cool do I look!") and the people with whom I interact ("Why would anyone think they looked good in those clothes?"). This is not, of course, to say we always fully understand what our actions mean to other people (as my disco example probably demonstrates), nor that our actions will mean the same things to others as they mean to us. This, however, leads to the idea of:

Interpretations: Our behaviour is constantly open to interpretation, both by ourselves ("Why did I wear that tie with that shirt?") and others ("Nice tie, shame about the dancing"). In addition, interpretation reflects back on meaning since, as we've suggested, how I interpret the behaviour of others is going to depend on what it means to me.

Negotiations: Thinking about how people interact involves a certain level of negotiation; that is, we are able to "discuss" (in the widest sense of the word) the meaning of our actions and how others should interpret them. Social life and social interaction, in this respect, doesn't simply involve obeying rules without question since the meaning of our behaviour to others can change, depending on the circumstances surrounding our behaviour.

For example, whenever I start to teach a new class we lay down some basic rules of behaviour, one of which is that when I set homework I specify the date for its completion. The first piece of homework is, normally, dutifully completed on time by all my students (they're new and unsure about how I'll act if they try to hand the work in late). By the next piece of work, there's usually one student (who will, for the purpose of avoiding an expensive law suit, rename nameless – but I think you probably know who we're talking about) who asks if they can hand the work in after the deadline. This is an example of how rules are negotiated, since the student is asking the lecturer to *renegotiate* the established rule.

I'm sorry but I'm really going to have to come down hard on you about this homework situation.

This is a crucial point in my teaching since how I respond to this deviant (norm-breaking) behaviour sets the tone for all future homework deadlines – if I extend the deadline for this student (their hamster had, after all, been eaten by their aunt and they were too traumatised by this sad turn of events to even think about completing the work that had been set) then I

send a signal to my students that deadlines are negotiable and rules are flexible. If, however, I say the student must hand in the work on time or leave the course I've sent a different message – one that says "Don't mess with me 'cos I'm a hard, heartless, dude" who cares nothing for hamsters, aunts or indeed traumatic life experiences (or something to that effect anyway).

Social Structure: The concept of social structure, as we've suggested, focuses on group behaviour (usually, but not exclusively, on very large groups – social *institutions* such as education for example) and how social life is *patterned* (in terms of regularities in group behaviour). An easy way to develop our thoughts about social structures is to illustrate this idea using the concept of:
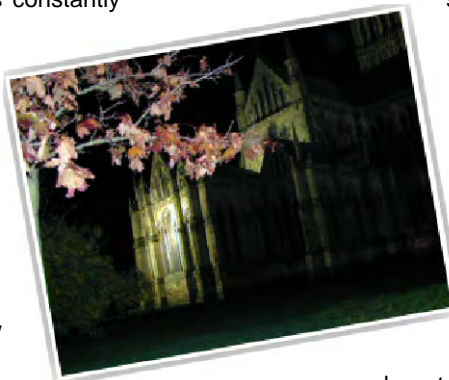
Whoooo-oooooo: Spooky

Haunting suggested by **Meighan** (1981), when he argues social actions are always surrounded by the g*hosts of social structures*. We are all, he argues, *haunted* by things we cannot see but which nevertheless affect our behaviour. For example, when teachers and students enter a classroom (for the purpose of education) the interaction between them is haunted by things like:

• **Physical environment**: Whether the room is warm and inviting or, alternatively, cold, dark and off-putting; whether the classroom resembles a prison cell or a bright, modern, learning lab – such things affect the teaching and learning process.

• **Knowledge** being taught: Classroom teaching reflects what our culture values (or doesn't value, as the case may be). What and how you're taught and the ways you're allowed, as students, to demonstrate knowledge are all evidence of the impact of social structures. Is, for example, *theoretical knowledge* - such as the ability to write essays about Shakespeare - more valued than *practical knowledge*, such as the ability to build a brick wall?

• **Language** of education: The language we speak is structured in terms of both grammatical rules (know what I mean?) and in terms of how it can be used to communicate ideas. At A-level, for example, you're expected to learn the *technical language* of the subjects (such as Sociology, Physics or Media Studies) you're studying if you want to do well in your exams.

• **Demands** of employers: If employers require qualifications from their workforce, teachers are haunted (in terms of what they teach, when they teach it and so forth) by the ghost of examinations. In our education system, for example, students have to be taught against a background of preparation for formal examinations - they have to learn the techniques involved, what constitutes knowledge acceptable to an examiner and so forth.

> **Module Link**   **Education**
>
> **Meighan's** concept of "**haunting**" (in terms of the ideas we've just noted) can be applied to our understanding of the role and purpose of the education system.

Social Structure and Social Action: The concepts of structure and action are both important, in terms of understanding the relationship between society and the individual, and complementary. Although we're all individuals, our behavioural choices are influenced, limited and enhanced by the framework of rules and responsibilities (social structures) that surround us as we go about our daily lives. Just as we cannot conceive of society without individuals (who, after all, but people can create society?) it's very difficult to think about people without needing to refer to the various ways our behaviour is structured. Ideas about structure and action, therefore, are fundamental to sociologists (just as they are, probably unwittingly, to us all) because they reflect two important ideas about social behaviour:

It's lonely being an individual - but at least you can be moody for a reason...

1. Diversity: On the one hand, people are free to make choices about their behaviour and this results in **cultural diversity** (or difference) over how they organise their society and relationships. We can demonstrate this idea by looking at examples of how different cultures view the same behaviour:

> In **Britain**, it's legal for an 18 year old to order a pint of beer in a pub. In **America**, an 18 year old exhibiting the same behaviour is committing a criminal offence (you have to be at least 21 for this behaviour to be legal).
>
> In **Britain**, when you meet someone it's acceptable to shake their hand. In **Japan**, it's more socially acceptable to bow when greeting someone. The depth of the bow is important – if greeting someone of a *higher social status* you should bow lower than they do. In **India**, shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex is unacceptable.
>
> In **America**, to beckon someone with the palm facing upwards and crooking your index finger is an acceptable way of calling someone towards you. In **India**, the same action is viewed as an insult (the palm should always face downward, in case you were wondering).

2. Culture: On the other hand, our behavioural choices are influenced by both the society / culture into which we are born and our relationship to other people (whether as family, friends and work colleagues or

simply on the basis of our awareness of sharing things (like a common nationality) with others in our society). A key idea to understand, therefore, is that in order to engage in *social action* there must exist some sort of *framework* (or *structure*) within which that action can take place. For example, in terms of the cultural diversity examples we've just noted, the framework might include things like:

Verbal communication: It's difficult to communicate with someone if you don't share a language with them.

Non-verbal communication, which involves the ability to understand gestures, body language, roles being played and the respective statuses of the social actors.

> **Sociological Perspectives: Observations**

The distinction we've made between the concepts of "social structure" and "social action" represent general observations about the relationship between the individual, on the one hand, and society on the other and we can refine the focus of these ideas somewhat by thinking about the various ways sociologists explain their relationship in more specific terms. To do this we can start to outline a number of different **sociological perspectives** - or, to put it another way, different ways of seeing, thinking about and understanding the social world. However, before we outline how the views of different (individual) sociologists can be broadly grouped into "sociological perspectives", we need to note two things:

Firstly we need to take on board the idea that it's possible for people to view the same behaviour yet "see" it from a different perspective and, consequently, interpret its meaning and significance differently.

Secondly, some sociologists view *social structures* as the most important factor in understanding behaviour while other sociologists see *social action* as the key factor. A third group argue both should be given equal prominence in any explanation of behaviour.

What it would be helpful to do next, therefore, is outline some of the main characteristics of sociological perspectives within these three general categories.

Structuralist Perspectives

For Structuralist sociologists, the key idea, as you might have guessed, is the way social structures shape and, possibly, determine people's behaviour. Structuralist perspectives (which for our convenience can be sub-divided into two further categories – *Consensus* and *Conflict* Structuralism) focus on the following ideas:

Roles, routines and responsibilities: In other words, understanding how the relationships we form "lock us into" orderly and broadly predictable behaviour.

Group, rather than individual, behaviour: The interest here is looking at how cultural rules limit our behavioural choices through the *social pressures* they exert. Just as our behaviour is constrained by *physical objects* (walls and tables for example), it's also constrained by *social objects* (such as roles, norms and values).

Institutions not individuals: Developing from the above, Structuralists argue we should examine large social groups (families, for example) if we are to understand how society works and, for this reason, you sometimes see this perspective called *macro* (or "large-scale") sociology.

Objectivity: This relates to the idea of people being *objects* (in the same way as we refer to things like tables as objects). For Structuralists, people are often portrayed as "puppets", their behaviour being influence, shaped and occasionally determined by the "invisible hand" of society.

Action Perspectives

In some ways social action perspectives are the opposite of structural perspectives and for action sociologists, the emphasis is on the way people create the social world through their relationships and actions. These sociologists, therefore, tend to focus on ideas like:

Individual choices: In some ways, action sociology is a type of *social psychological* perspective, one that tries to understand social behaviour (or action) from the individual's point-of-view - understanding, for example, the different ways people see the social world, their place in it and their relationship to others.

People create society: An obvious point, perhaps, but a significant

one. For action theorists it's important to remember "society" is *not* a thing; rather it consists of people going about their lives on a daily basis, creating and recreating a "sense of society" as they do so. Action sociologists often refer to the idea of seeing society as "a thing" (something that has a real, concrete, existence in the same way that people and objects have a real, physical, existence) as an *error of reification*; "reification", in this context, refers to the idea of giving human emotions to things that are not human (like calling a ship or car "she", for example, or, to use another example, when animated films give human characteristics – speech, emotions and the like – to animals). Action sociologists argue that Structuralists commit a *reification error* by treating something that is not alive / not human ("society") as if it had the kind of characteristics we associate with human beings (such as when **Durkheim** (1895), for example, talks about societies having "personalities"). In general, therefore, the focus on individual behaviours is sometimes called *micro* (or "small scale") sociology.

Meanings: To explain behaviour we must examine what people understand about the social world in which they live. We have, in short, to understand how people "define situations" because how we define a situation (what it *means* to them) determines how we will behave in that situation.

Subjectivity relates to the idea of people being able to think about both their own behaviour and that of others – to make decisions and choices, for example. Rather than being puppets, people are seen more as actors on the "stage" of society.

Structuration

This type of perspective (as developed by, for example **Giddens**, 1998) aims to combine the ideas of structure and action to arrive at a sociological perspective that expresses two main ideas:

1. People make society: As we've already seen, the idea of a society (or, indeed, any social group) is nonsensical without people. Only people can create societies (which reflects the action approach noted above)

2. Society makes people: On the other hand, the idea of social action can only have meaning when we place it in a structural context. For example, the only reason these words have meaning to you is because they exist within a structure of language (rules we need to obey in order to communicate effectively). Although there is a clear structure to our language (based on grammatical norms), we can be *actively creative* in the way we use it – not just through the ideas and emotions we can express, but also in our ability to adapt the structure of language itself – as these two examples demonstrate:

Shakespeare

To be or not to be, that is the question

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet

Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

One more unto the breech, dear friends, once more

Txt Messaging

2b or not 2b thats ?

a @(---`---`--- by any otha name wd sml swEt

rm rm w4Ru rm?

1nc mr un2 T brech dr frnds 1nc mr

"When a 13-year-old Scottish girl handed in an essay written in text message shorthand, she explained to her flabbergasted teacher that it was easier than Standard English. She wrote:

'My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.'.

Translation

"My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three scream-ing kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place".

Source: **http://www.bbc.co.uk**

Sociological Perspectives: Explanations

Having identified some broad features of different sociological approaches, we can break these categories down to look in more detail at a number of specific sociological perspectives:

Structuralist Perspectives

For Structuralist sociologists society, as **Jones** (1985) argues, is seen as: "A structure of (cultural) rules", guiding our behaviour and telling us things like: How to behave appropriately in any given situation and what to expect in terms of the behaviour of others. From this general perspective, therefore, individual behaviour is considered both uninteresting (Structuralists are not particularly concerned about why some individuals don't like going to school) and relatively unimportant. The fact some children don't like going to school is what **Mills** (1959) has called a:

Private problem: It's an issue for a small number of people and not very interesting to the majority. If, however, everyone stopped going to school this would represent a:

Public issue – something of concern to everyone. Structural sociologists, therefore, start to get interested at the point where *private problems* become *public issues*.

Attention, in this respect, is focused on how society pressurises individuals to perform roles, for example, so social life can continue on an orderly, predictable, basis. This general idea – that sociologists should study the way society impacts on individual behaviour – represents the main way Structuralist sociologists differ from Action sociologists. However, just to complicate matters we can, as I noted earlier, sub-divide structural perspectives into two further categories:

Consensus

Consensus Structuralism focuses on the way social order is created and maintained through agreement ("consensus") - through, for example, the development of shared norms and values. In this respect, one of the main *consensus perspectives* we can outline is:

Functionalism

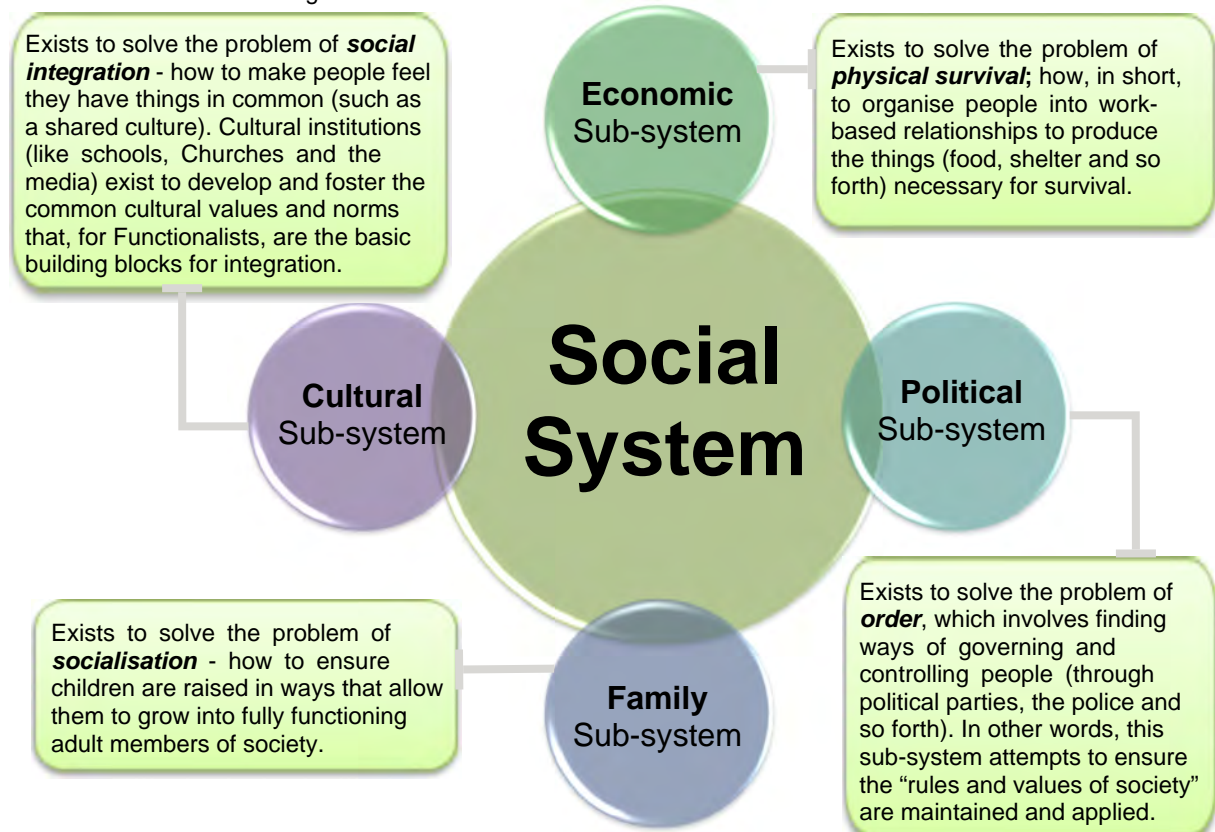As with most, if not all, sociological perspectives, one of the key questions for Functionalists is that of how **social order** and **stability** is created and maintained – and the answer is to be found in two areas. The first of these is an explanation of how societies are organised at the level of the:

Social System (sometimes called the "*systemic level of* analysis"): This involves the idea that the various parts of a society work together in harmony, such that each part is dependent on other parts of the system - an idea that is sometimes expressed in terms of an:

Organismic analogy (society is like a living organism): An easy way to visualise both the idea of a social system and the way each part of that system is inter-locking and interdependent is to think in terms of society being like a **human body**. Societies, from a traditional Functionalist perspective, consist of interconnected parts in much the same way the different parts of the body are interconnected - the various parts (heart, lungs, brain etc.) work together to form a living thing. In a similar way, the different parts of a society (family, school. Work...) are interconnected and work together to form a social system.

Keeping both this analogy and the idea of interconnections in mind, we can develop our ideas about Functionalist perspectives by noting that just as a human body has certain vital organs (things like the heart or the brain) that, if injured or damaged, can lead to death, so too does any society have "vital organs" that we can characterise, according to **Parsons'** (1937), as:

Sub-systems: **Parsons** argues every social system consists of four very large groups of people (or, as he puts it, "*functional sub-system*s"), each of which performs a different, but related, set of functions based on certain "problems" faced by every known society. These sub-systems (and the main problem they exist to solve) can be characterised in the following terms:

Exists to solve the problem of *social integration* - how to make people feel they have things in common (such as a shared culture). Cultural institutions (like schools, Churches and the media) exist to develop and foster the common cultural values and norms that, for Functionalists, are the basic building blocks for integration.

Economic Sub-system

Exists to solve the problem of *physical survival*; how, in short, to organise people into work-based relationships to produce the things (food, shelter and so forth) necessary for survival.

Cultural Sub-system

Social System

Political Sub-system

Exists to solve the problem of *socialisation* - how to ensure children are raised in ways that allow them to grow into fully functioning adult members of society.

Family Sub-system

Exists to solve the problem of *order*, which involves finding ways of governing and controlling people (through political parties, the police and so forth). In other words, this sub-system attempts to ensure the "rules and values of society" are maintained and applied.

We can develop the analogy by noting that just as a living human being requires the various organs of the body to be connected and working together (the heart pumps blood containing oxygen to the brain and so forth) a functioning social system requires connections to be made between these four sub-systems – and the mechanism that achieves this end is the idea of:

Purpose and Need: Social systems fit together on the basis of *institutional* purposes and needs. For example, for a family institution to exist (and perform its *functions*) it *needs* to be able to survive. The work institution performs this survival function in our society by allowing family members to earn the money they need to buy the food they consume (amongst other things); conversely, in order to fulfil this *purpose*, work *needs* families to produce socialised human beings; in more complex societies, such as the contemporary UK, an education system is also needed to provide the kinds of skills (such as literacy and numeracy) required by more advanced work processes. Considered in this way Functionalism is a perspective that focuses on *consensus*, since each part of society (just like each part of the human body) must perform its functions in cooperation with other parts of society. Everything that exists in a society, therefore, has both *purpose* (what it exists to do) and *needs* (things it requires from other parts of the system in order to fulfil its purpose or functions).

Although this first level of explanation is important, it isn't the whole story – Functionalists need to explain how *individuals* fit into this overall *structure* – and this

leads to the second part of the explanation in that they argue each sub system consists of various:
Institutions (a pattern of shared, stable, behaviour) whose existence and behaviour is governed by the fact that any organised social group (such as a family or a whole society) can only hang together if people do not simply pursue their own individual, selfish, self-interests.

In other words, if the millions of unique, thinking, human beings who make up our society simply acted in their own selfish interests things, as they say, would fall apart .

Cooperation is at the heart of Functionalist concepts of social behaviour - people working together to produce "society".

The mechanism that prevents this, according to someone like **Parsons** (1937) is the concept of:

Functional prerequisites: This reflects the idea that for individuals to survive and prosper they need to be part of larger co-operative groups – and for this to happen they must *combine* to solve a number of fundamental problems (or *functional prerequisites* – the things that must occur if society is to continue to function). In this respect, every social institution (such as an *education system*) must develop ways of solving "four problems of existence":

1. **Goal maintenance**: Any institution, if it is to flourish, needs to provide people with goals to achieve and some way of moving people towards their attainment. The education system, for example, provides goals such as academic qualifications and training and a general means towards how these are to be achieved (through examinations, tests and the like).

Functional Prerequisites: The "GAIL" model

Key Criticisms

2. **Adaptation**: There needs to be some way for people to achieve institutional goals and, in terms of an education system, this involves providing some form of co-operative *environment* (such as a school, classrooms and teachers) within which people can work to achieve such goals.

3. **Integration**: People have to be motivated to achieve (educational) goals and one way for this to happen is to encourage a "sense of belonging" (in this instance to both wider society – where educational qualifications have currency in that they can be used to "buy" a career in the workplace – and the education system itself). Integration represents the ways that a school, for example, tries to make people feel they both "belong" to the institution (something like a school uniform might serve this function) and have things in common with other members of the institution (such as working with teachers to achieve a common educational goal). Integration is closely related to the wider function of:

Social Solidarity – a general belief people have things in common (a sense of "Being British", for example) that bind them together. Integration mechanisms (such as the aforementioned school uniforms) represent the specific ways *social solidarity* (a sense of group identity) is encouraged in individuals.

4. **Latency**: This represents a way of managing potential conflicts within an institution – motivating people, rewarding conformity, punishing deviance and so forth. In other words it represents the idea of *rule creation* that allows and encourages a certain institutionally desirable pattern of behaviour to develop and be maintained (hence this prerequisite is sometimes called "*pattern maintenance*"). Schools, for example, have a range of rules governing such things as attendance, behaviour, dress and so forth designed to maintain a particular way of institutional life.

Functionalism, like any sociological perspective, has its critics, and we can identify three key criticisms of this general perspective:

Social Change: It's sometimes difficult to explain why anything in a society should change if it performs an essential and necessary function. In this respect, Functionalism is often seen as a politically conservative perspective that lends its support to the *status quo* (the desire to "keep things as they are"). Change, when it does occur, is likely to be slow and evolutionary, rather than rapid and revolutionary.

Do ceremonies such as the State Opening of Parliament and symbols - such as the Monarchy - promote a sense of social solidarity in our society?

Dysfunction: Although Functionalists focus (not too surprisingly perhaps) on the idea of function, consensus and harmony, they do recognise some things can be dysfunctional - the idea that too much (or not enough) of something may be dangerous or damaging to society. For example, although crime can have a *social solidarity* function - if it unites people against a common (criminal) enemy - too much crime can leave people feeling uncertain about the rule of law and their own safety (and hence it would be dysfunctional). The main criticism here is that Functionalists tend to place too much emphasis on the "beneficial aspects" of social institutions and groups and downplay the possible significance of any dysfunctional tendencies. Schools, for example, may be places where children learn many useful things – but they're also places where bullying, sexism and racism may exist.

Although crime has a number of functions (you might like to think about what they might be), too much crime in society is dysfunctional (again, you might like to think about possible reasons for this).

Tautology: This a statement that contains its own proof and Functionalists are sometimes accused of producing such arguments to justify their ideas. For example, the claim that "If something exists in society, it has a function" is supported by the argument that "It has a function because it exists…". A tautological statement (such as the one I've just noted), in other words, cannot be disproved.

Conflict

The key idea for this, rather different, perspective is that societies are generally stable and orderly because of the ability of *powerful groups* to impose their ideas on other groups (the powerless). Unlike Consensus theorists who see society as being broadly beneficial, in some way, to the majority of its members, Conflict theorists argue some groups benefit far more than others. Two types of Conflict structuralism we can examine in more detail are *Marxism* (where the basis of conflict is *economic* – different *social classes* constantly battling against each other) and *Feminism*, where the basis of conflict is *gender* - men and women battling it out with each other for supremacy.

Marxism

We can highlight a number of the key ideas of this perspective in terms of ideas like:

Work: For Marxists, the most important form of activity in any society is work, for the deceptively important reason that all other forms of social activity (politics, family, culture and the like) cannot exist without people first having secured the means to their survival (if you don't have enough to eat or a roof over your head then the lack of anything interesting to watch on TV is probably not going to be your most pressing concern). Thus, how work is socially organised (who does it, what

they do and who benefits from it) is seen as the key to understanding how all other social relationships are organised.

Conflict: The workplace is a key area of conflict in any society because of the way it is organised. Marxists argue that, in our society (called "Capitalist" for reasons that will become clear in a moment) the "*means of economic production*" (things like factories, machinery and land) are owned by one *class* of people (the *Bourgeoisie* or Ruling Class). The vast majority of people, on the other hand, own little or nothing and so are forced to sell the one thing they do own - their ability to work (their "*labour power*"). For Marxists, therefore, we have a situation in which:

• A small number of people *own the means of production* – in Capitalist societies they become very rich because they keep *profits* made from producing goods and services.

• A large number of people own nothing but their ability to work for wages – these people (the working-class or *Proletariat*) are relatively poor (when compared to their Bourgeois employers).

Conflict potentially occurs in this type of society because:

• **Owners** want to keep as much of their profit as possible (the less you pay in wages, the greater the amount you can keep to buy desirable things – like Chelsea Football Club, for example).

• **Non-owners** want a larger slice of the economic pie. The working-class also want the desirable things their society has to offer – it's in their interests, therefore, to demand more from employers.

Competition (and therefore *conflict*) is inevitable. Competition is not simply encouraged in Capitalist societies; it's also

Work - good for the soul (especially when it's pother people doing it).
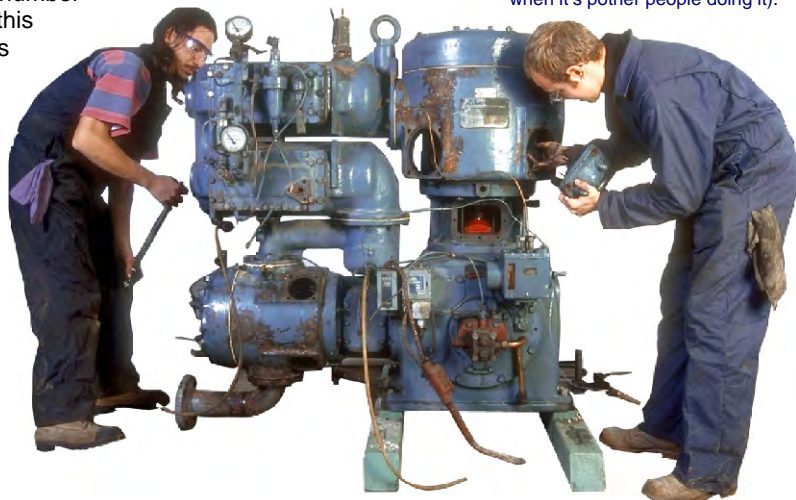
viewed as desirable since it's through competition, the argument goes, that wealth is created and progress made (through the constant invention and reinvention of new ways of doing things, for example). Although, for Marxists, economic forms of competition and conflict are, as we've noted, most significant, competition occurs throughout society - between businesses, between different groups of workers, between men and women and so forth.

Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough...

Social class: This involves grouping people in terms of their "relationship to the means of production". For Marxists, as we've just suggested, two basic classes exist in any Capitalist society:

• **The Bourgeoisie** (sometimes called the ruling or upper class): Those who own the means of production.

• **The Proletariat** (sometimes called the lower or working class): People who own nothing but their ability to work.

The picture is not quite as simple as this, of course; there may be many different relationships to the means of production – *managers*, for example, may not own a business but they can be considered to be a different social class to non-managers (sometimes called the middle class or *petit bourgeoisie*) - but you probably get the basic idea. As you might expect, because of their view of work as the most important social activity, class conflict is considered more significant than other types of conflict (such as between men and women – sex-based conflict - or different ethnic groups – "racial" conflicts)

Power: Amidst all this emphasis on conflict, you could be forgiven for thinking our society is engaged in a war of all-against-all; this, however, is clearly not the case and Marxists explain this by suggesting that those at the "top" of society (the ruling class) are not only *economically powerful*, they are also *politically powerful*. This means they control how laws are made (through politicians identifying with the interests of a ruling class) - and, of course, they can use force (the police and the army for example) – to try to minimise conflict. **Althusser** (1968) characterises these methods of social control as "**Repressive State Apparatuses**" because they represent a way of compelling people to conform. A ruling class is also, from this perspective, able to influence how people generally think about the social world through their political control / ownership of ideological institutions (such as the media and the education system) that deal in ideas (what **Althusser** calls "**Ideological State Apparatuses**").

Key Criticisms

Marxism, as you might expect, has its critics, and we can identify three key criticisms of this general perspective in the following terms:

Conflict: Marxism over-emphasises the level of conflict in society and underplays the significance of non-economic types of conflict (gender or ethnic conflicts, for example).
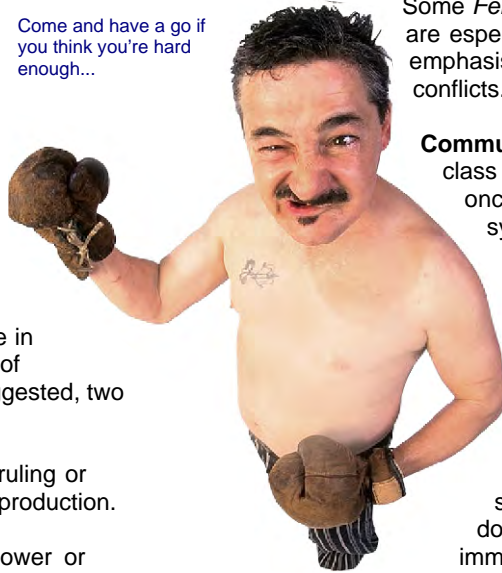
Some *Feminists* (see below) are especially critical of the emphasis on work-based conflicts.

Communism: For Marxists, class conflict will only end once the economic system on which it's based (Capitalism) is replaced by a Communist form of society - a type of society where work is not organised around private profit. Whatever the short-comings of Capitalist societies, Communism doesn't appear imminent...

Economic determinism: Marxism assumes work is the most important institution in any society. While this may have (arguably) been true in Britain in the past, some writers (especially, as we will see, *postmodernists*) argue this is no longer the case and, consequently, question the significance of *social class* as a source of people's *identity*.

Module Link　　　　**Culture and Identity**

The concept of identity – and the possible significance of non-class forms of identity such as age, gender and ethnicity is developed in greater depth in this Module.
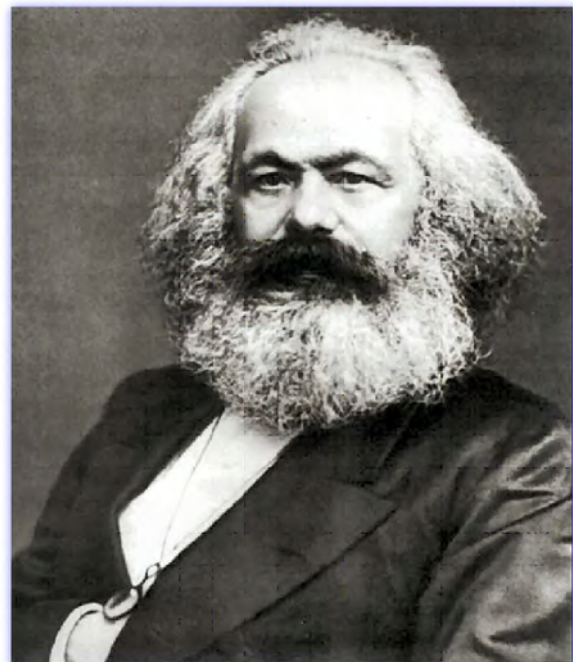
Karl Marx [1818-1883]
He may look like your favourite grandparent but don't be fooled - beneath that beard he's probably hiding a sharp pointy stick.

Feminism

Like people, "Feminism" comes in a variety of shapes and sizes – too many to properly consider here. Instead we can examine four varieties - the *classical feminist perspectives* (the ones every textbook, including, of course, this one, outlines): Liberal, Marxist and Radical feminism as well as a newer variety, sometimes called Post-feminism. The classical forms are sometimes called "2nd Wave feminism", whereas post-feminism ("post" meaning "after") is sometimes called "3rd Wave feminism" to indicate its break with classical feminisms.

Despite their differences, one theme common to all varieties of classical feminism (post-feminism has a rather different take on the matter) is the belief our society is *male-dominated*; the interests of men have always been - and continue to be - considered more important than the interests of women. We can see how this idea influences the basic beliefs of different forms of classical feminism in the following terms:

Liberal

Liberal Feminism involves a number of key ideas:

Equality of Opportunity: Liberal feminists are mainly concerned with *equal opportunities* for men and women (not "equality", as such, but rather the chance to compete equally with men); in broad terms, therefore, they want an end to the *sexual discrimination* which denies women the opportunity to compete on equal terms with men - and one way to establish equality of opportunity, they generally argue, is through the:

Legal System: Liberal feminists have been active, in Britain and America for example, in promoting a range of *anti-discriminatory* laws which, they argue, are needed to redress the historical gender imbalance. In the UK, legislation such as *the Sex Discrimination Act* (1975), which made discrimination in the workplace illegal and *the Equal Pay Act* (1970) are examples of this approach to gender inequality.

Dual Role: The idea women increasingly play a dual role (as both carers within the family and paid employees) is, according to liberal feminists, a major area of inequality that needs to be addressed – both in terms of changing male attitudes to family life and through the continued development of anti-discriminatory laws and practices (such as the introduction of child-care facilities for working women, maternity and paternity leave and so forth).

Key Criticisms

Status inequality: Critics (not the least being other feminist perspectives) argue *legal equality* is not the same as *status equality* (the idea of

women having equal status to men). In other words, women are still treated in ways that assume they are inferior to men; in the UK, for example, women can expect to earn, on average during their working lifetime, 80% of male income – even when doing roughly comparable work.

Class differences: By lumping all women together as a "class", liberal feminism ignores differences in the life experiences of different women; working class women, for example, do not have the same advantages as upper class women - they face, for example, far greater difficulties in securing equal opportunities. In addition, black women, in general, have different life experiences and chances to white women.

Marxist

Marxist Feminism involves, as the label suggests, the application of Marxist ideas to gender relationships. In this respect we can note the following key ideas:

Class inequality: Marxist feminists see class inequality as the main cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination in our society. In a competitive, Capitalist, society men are encouraged to exploit any "weaknesses" in women's market position (for example, the fact women may be out of the workforce during pregnancy) to their own advantage.

Patriarchal Ideology (ideas that support male domination of women): Although patriarchy is an important concept, Marxist feminists use it to show how the social and economic exploitation of women is justified (by both men and women) through powerful *ideas* about masculinity and femininity. For example, ideas that men are "natural breadwinners" and women "natural homemakers" can be strong influences on people's behaviour.

Social class: Marxist feminists argue men and women are not separate (*sex-based*) classes; upper class women, for example, have very little in common with working class women except their biology (the fact they are all physically women). Men and women, the argument goes, both have an interest in creating a form of society (Communism) in which men and women are treated equally.

Domestic Labour is viewed as exploitative (because it is unpaid labour). Women are also sometimes seen as what **Barrett and McIntosh** (1982) call a:
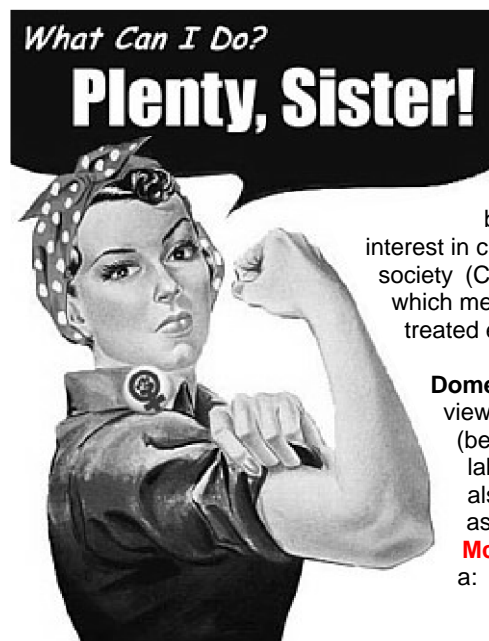
Reserve army of labour - a concept that refers to women who are called into the workforce when the economy expands and "dumped" ("encouraged" to return to domestic labour) when the economy contracts.

Gender socialisation: The development of patriarchal ideas, attitudes and practices (such as sexual discrimination) are seen as the product of differences in the way men and women are socialised – men are not naturally exploitative of women; rather, it is the economic system (Capitalism) that encourages and rewards sexist attitudes and behaviour.

> **Module Link   Families and Households**
>
> The relationship between gender and domestic labour is examined in more detail in this Module.

Key Criticisms

Patriarchy: Male domination of women seems to be a feature of all known human societies, not just class-based (Capitalist) societies. Radical feminists, for example, argue this means patriarchal relationships should be given more emphasis than economic (class) relationships.

Patriarchal exploitation: Marxist feminism assumes (rightly or wrongly) men and women have similar "long-term" interests (the replacement of an unequal, patriarchal, Capitalist society with an equal, non-patriarchal, Communist society). Whether or not this is true, the development of a Communist form of society (as we've noted earlier) doesn't look a very likely prospect, in our society at least, for the foreseeable future.

Social change: A major criticism of Marxist feminism is that it ignores the extent to which society – and the respective positions of men and women - has changed and continues to change. Female lives, for example, have altered quite dramatically over the past 50 years, considered in terms of things like family responsibilities, educational achievements (where women now out-perform men at just about every level) and work opportunities.

In the light of these ideas, therefore, we can consider a third form of classical feminism:

Radical   **Radical Feminism has** a number of key ideas:

Patriarchy / Patriarchal Ideology: These are two key ideas for Radical feminists, mainly because, they argue, all known human societies have been - and remain - male dominated (a situation such feminists want to change). Given this idea, improvements in women's lives can only come about through the overthrow of the patriarchal ideas and practices that oppress women in general. This follows because Radical feminists see men and women as having basic *psychological* differences – in crude terms, men are seen to be naturally aggressive and confrontational whereas women have qualities of co-operation, caring (nurturing) and so forth. Given these basic differences,

therefore, males and females are seen in terms of the concept of:

Sex class: This type of feminism sees woman as a class (based on both a common biology and gender) with its own experiences and interests that are significantly different to those of men. Just as Marxist perspectives see the overthrow of the ruling (economic) class as the way to achieve human liberation, Radical feminists argue it's necessary for women to overthrow the ruling *sex class* (men) if they are to achieve liberation - an idea based on the concept of:

Matriarchy (female domination of men): Men are, in effect, the enemy of women because, throughout history, they have exploited women for their own gain. For this situation to end women have to establish a *matriarchal society* in terms of which the current (patriarchal) roles are reversed; instead of men dominating and exploiting women, women dominate men. **Rich** (1980) developed the term '*compulsory heterosexuality*' to express the idea that male-female relationships are the basis of patriarchy (and therefore the source of male domination) and Radical feminists often advocate lesbian relationships and the development of women-only support groups as a way of both developing matriarchal ideas and practices and rejecting their patriarchal equivalents,

Unlike most other forms of Feminism, Radical Feminists generally argue we should replace one form of domination (patriarchy) with another (matriarchy).

Public and private spheres: Discrimination against women takes place in two main areas: the *Public* (for example, the workplace where women are paid less and have lower status) and the *Private* (the home, where women carry out the majority of unpaid domestic work) – a *dual form* of female exploitation not experienced by men.

Key Criticisms

Sex class: As we've noted, female life chances, considered across categories like class, age and ethnicity, are not necessarily very similar; differences clearly exist, for example, in terms of:

• **Age** – younger women, for example, tend to have different life chances to those of older women.

• **Social class**: The life chances of upper class women are significantly different to those of lower class women.

• **Ethnicity**: The life chances of black women are different to those of white women.

We could also, of course, consider combinations of these categories to extend the argument that women – like their male counterparts – are not a particularly homogeneous cultural (as opposed to biological) grouping; young, upper class, black women, for example, have significantly different life chances to elderly, lower class, white women. The question here, therefore, is do all women share the same interests - are they, in short, a sex class or does Radical feminism downplay the importance of class, age and ethnic differences in the exploitation of women?

Psychologies: Differences in male and female psychologies can be seen as the product of *gender socialisation* rather than being *innate* (fixed and unchanging) differences. Given the opportunity women seem just as capable as men of aggressive behaviour, for example.

Are women naturally less aggressive than men - or does the social context of people's behaviour influence how they behave?

Relationships: Not all gender relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation and the relative position of women in our society has improved / changed over the past 50 years.

Are the differences between women - class, age, ethnicity etc. - more significant than the (biological) similarities?

Criticisms of classical feminist perspectives have, in part, led to the development of a further form of feminist position we can briefly examine:

Post-Feminism

Post-Feminism is a perspective covering many different viewpoints, making it difficult to capture the flavour of all its varieties in a few short paragraphs. As the "Feminism with a Difference" web site puts it: "*The term "post-feminism" has had popular usage in Western society since the late 1980's. It refers to a belief that gender equality has been successfully achieved, while simultaneously castigating the feminist movement for making women frustrated and unhappy*". (www.difference-feminism.com).

We can, however, identify some of the key ideas of this general position in terms of:

Anti-Essentialism: The concept of *essentialism* reflects the belief there are fundamental ("essential") differences between males and females. These relate not simply to *biological differences* but, most importantly, *to psychological differences* in the way men and women think, act and feel. **Butler** (1990) argues this *essentialism* is mistaken, for two reasons:

Firstly, she rejects the claim women are a sex class.

Secondly, and more-controversially perhaps, she questions the usefulness of categories such as "man" and "woman" since, in our society today, they probably involve more *differences* than *similarities*. For example, think about the different forms of male and female identities that exist in our society - from *homophobic* men to *transsexual* women.

Gender, for **Butler**, is considered as a "*performance*" - things we do at different times rather than something we "always are" and her solution to *gender essentialism* is the subversion of separate "male" and "female" identities. She argues we should no-longer see men and women as two distinctive sexes; rather, we should see **gender** as a range of *social processes*, some of

which are similar (such as some gay men who display traditional female traits and women who display traditional masculine traits) and some of which are different.

Choice: This idea – central to **postmodern perspectives** (see below) - reflects the idea that in contemporary societies men and women have a range of choices open to them that were denied to all but the (rich) few in the past. One choice, for example, is expressed in terms of how we define ourselves (our **personal identity**) - men and women have greater freedom to construct gender identities in almost any way they choose. For post-feminists in particular, the "personal construction of femininity" often involves "reclaiming femininity" in the sense women can be both "feminine" (whatever that means in practice) and able to pursue what in the past were almost exclusively masculine preserves - things like a full-time education, a career and so forth.

Transgression: This means "cutting across categories or boundaries" and can be used in two ways here. Firstly, it relates to (traditional) ideas about masculinity and femininity – the idea, in short, you are either "a man" or "a woman". In this respect, post-feminism argues *identity transgression* occurs when women, for example, choose to adopt ways of thinking and behaving traditionally seen as "masculine". Examples here range from *Ladettes* (young women who mirror the (often outrageous) behaviour of young males – "Booze, Bonking and the Beautiful game") to *transgendered* individuals who define themselves as "neither male nor female".

Secondly, it relates to the argument that the traditional concerns of feminism (patriarchy, gender equality and so forth) are now redundant – they are concerns related to a type of society that has disappeared. As society has changed, so too have notions about gender and it's becoming increasingly meaningless to talk about "men" and "women" as if they were two separate and unrelated ideas.

Key Criticisms

Choice: For critics of post-feminism, the idea of women in general being able to exercise choice in their lives is doubtful. For the rich (whether male or female) a massive range of behavioural choices exist. For the poor, behavioural choices are far more restricted.

Class: Leading on from the above, it's clear concepts such as social class, age and ethnicity impact on the range of choices open to both men and women.

Individualism: Post-feminism has been accused of downplaying the problems faced by the majority of women, in the sense most women's lives are not characterised by unlimited choice, freedom and individual self-expression (just as the same is probably true for most male lives). As **Coppock** (1995) argues: "The irony is…that the proclamation of 'post-feminism' has occurred at precisely the same moment as acclaimed feminist studies demonstrate that not only have women's real advancements been limited, but also there has been a backlash against feminism of international significance".

Action Perspectives

Although there are a range of competing Social Action perspectives (**Ethnomethodology**, **Phenomenology** and **Symbolic Interactionism** for example), for our purposes we can consider this perspective in terms of the catch-all category of:

Interactionism – mainly because it captures the flavour of this general position by emphasising the significance of relationships at the level of individual interactions, For Interactionist sociologists, therefore, the emphasis is on how we construct the social world through our individual relationships – and from this general perspective, "society" is something created and recreated on a daily basis by people going about their lives. In other words, unlike Structural sociologists who focus on the way society pushes and pulls the individual in various directions – "making" us form family groups or develop educational systems – Interactionists want to reverse this picture. Their interest lies in understanding and explaining the various ways human beings constantly and consciously produce and reproduce the social world through their individual and collective behaviour.

From this perspective, therefore, society is little more than a label or name that represents little more than an "*elaborate fiction*" people create as a way of explaining the limits they consciously and unconsciously place on their behaviour – an idea we can illustrate by suggesting that from an Interactionist perspective the
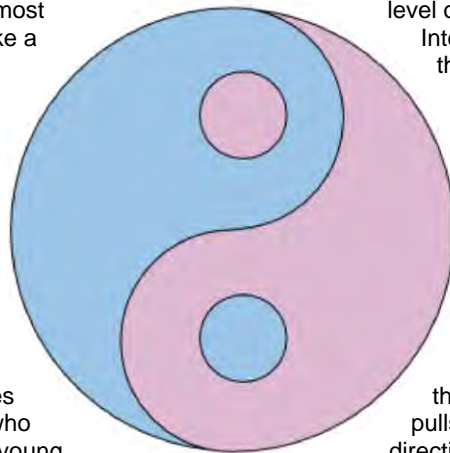
Perhaps advertisers need to be told we live in a post-feminist era...

concept of "society" is a bit like the **Hans Christian Andersen** *(1837) tale of* "The Emperor's New Clothes".

In the tale a vain Emperor is tricked into believing he's wearing a suit made from the finest cloth when, in actual fact, he's wearing nothing at all. As he parades, totally naked, through the streets of his city his loyal (and fearful) subjects all profess to marvel at the wonder and finery of the Emperor's new clothes. It's not until a child points-out that the Emperor is, in fact, totally naked that the illusion bursts.

Interactionist sociologists, in this respect, are a little like the child in the sense that they started to question the prevailing sociological orthodoxy of Structuralism – whether Consensus or Conflict – that painted a picture of "society" as a vast, invisible, all-pervading force acting on people in ways that propel them into particular forms of behaviour. What Interactionism tried to do, in this respect, was to bring the sociological focus back to individual behaviour by trying to understand the various *socio-psychological* processes through which people constructed both social groups and, by extension, a sense of society.

In the process Interactionists such as **Garfinkel** (1967) demonstrated not just how societies were constructed through social interaction but also how precarious the nature of our "taken-for-granted" beliefs about the social world actually are – as evidenced by this classic example of how easy it is to disrupt people's understandings and expectations by simply questioning their everyday use of language…

> "Hi, Ray. How is your girl friend feeling?"
>
> "What do you mean, "How is she feeling?" Do you mean physical or mental?"
>
> "I mean how is she feeling? What's the matter with you? (He looked peeved.)"
>
> "Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?"
>
> "Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?"
>
> "What do you mean, "How are they?""
>
> "You know what I mean."
>
> "I really don't."
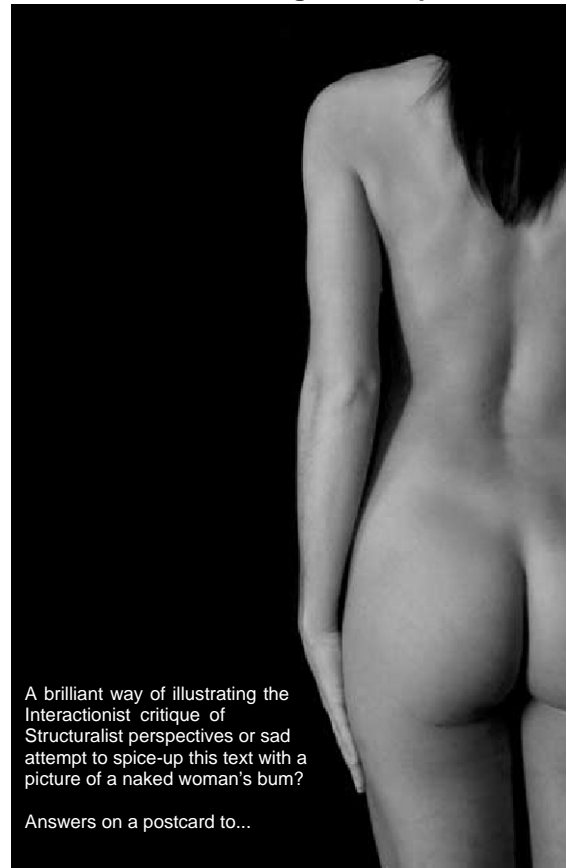>
> "What's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

For Interactionists social life is a series of *encounters* - separate, but linked, episodes in our lives that give the appearance of order and stability - not something imposed on us ("from above", by society). Order and predictability exist, therefore, for as long as we *act* in ways that serve to maintain them.

Key Ideas

Interactionism's key ideas are:

Social Interaction: The social world is created by the "interactions between people", a process that involves:

Meanings: In terms of social interaction, this perspective stresses the importance of what we each understand by something (its *meaning*) that works on two levels.

A brilliant way of illustrating the Interactionist critique of Structuralist perspectives or sad attempt to spice-up this text with a picture of a naked woman's bum?

Answers on a postcard to...

Firstly, to interact socially we must develop shared "**definitions of any situation**" (in the above example one participant deliberately questioned the other's definition of the situation by asking questions that were interpreted as rude and ignorant). To put this another way, if a teacher defines a situation as "education" and her student defines it as a skateboard park, a free-and-frank exchange of views might develop.

Secondly, if the meaning of something is only developed through interaction then meanings can change fairly easily. For example, in terms of gender, the meaning of being "masculine" or "feminine" in our society has changed quite dramatically over the past few years – and if this idea is valid, it means the social world always involves:

Negotiated realities: This idea follows from the above because society and culture are not seen as things that are necessarily fixed or slow to change. On the contrary, because meanings are *negotiated* (or argued over) the social world is fluid and can, on occasions, change rapidly. As we've suggested, Interactionists don't see society as a "thing" acting on our behaviour (since it has no *objective reality* outside of social interaction); rather, society is just a convenient:

Label we give to the pressures, rules and responsibilities that arise out of our social relationships. The idea of labelling (or naming) is an important one since it suggests how Interactionists view social structures as forms of social interaction. *Labelling theory*, for example, argues that when we name something (such as categorising people as "young" or "elderly") we associate the name with a set of characteristics, our knowledge of which is used to guide our behaviour (which, in a roundabout way, brings us

back to the idea of a *definition of a situation*). For example, the characteristics I assign to the label "student" lead me to expect certain things from a person so labelled, in the same way that I would expect something quite different if they were labelled as "criminal" or "shop assistant".

Key Criticisms

Over-emphasis on "the individual": The emphasis on individuals, meanings and interaction ignores the idea social structures do seem to impact on our lives (as we saw when we looked at **Meighan's** idea of *haunting*). In another respect, by focusing on the *social-psychological* aspects of social life, Interactionist sociology fails to explain adequately how and why people seem to behave in broadly similar ways (such as living in families, obeying the law, going to school or work and so forth).

Social structures: A major criticism of Interactionism is that it doesn't explain how individual meanings, definitions and interpretations are affected by social structures. For example, if I define a situation as one thing (a fancy dress party, for example) and others define it as something else (a game of cricket), this will have serious consequences for me (and not just in terms of the fact I can't bat properly in my chicken outfit) – which introduces the idea of **power** as an important concept. We are not equal in our ability to define situations – some groups (or classes) have greater power than others when it comes to defining a situation as "real" (and if you don't believe me, ask a police officer).

Postmodernism

This is a relatively new type of sociological perspective, one developed over the past 15 or so years and although we've characterised it as an action approach, you need to be careful with such a characterisation (as you do, of course, with any attempt to categorise sociological perspectives) for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, as you will no-doubt discover, postmodernism doesn't fit neatly into any particular theoretical category.

Secondly, as writers like **Usher and Edwards** (1994) argue, postmodernism "is best understood as a state of mind, a critical, self-referential posture and style, a different way of seeing and working, rather than a fixed body of ideas, a

clearly worked out position or a set of critical methods and techniques". In other words we should be wary of trying to characterise a diverse body of ideas and beliefs as a coherent "perspective" (sociological or otherwise).

Keeping these ideas in mind, however, this isn't to say it's not possible to identify a number of general ideas that both feature in postmodern accounts of social behaviour and provide a general flavour of these approaches to understanding the social world.
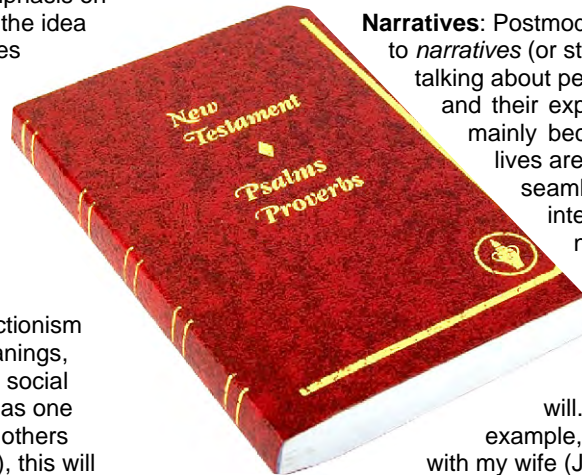
Narratives: Postmodernists refer to *narratives* (or stories) when talking about people's lives and their experiences, mainly because our lives are viewed as a seamless web of inter-locking narratives which we define and move between at will. For example, when I'm with my wife (Julia, since you ask), the narrative I construct is one of a loving, helpful, dutiful, husband, alert to her every need, whim and desire. However, when I'm out down the pub with my mates the narrative I construct is somewhat different (I'll leave it to your imagination). I have no problem moving between these narratives and I am always the person I believe myself to be in each (which means I'm either a fantastic person or a consummate liar).

Metanarratives are "big stories" we construct either individually or, more usually, as a culture to explain something about the nature of the social and natural worlds. Examples of metanarratives might include *religions* (such as Christianity or Islam) and political philosophies (Socialism or Conservativism for example). For **Lyotard** (1979) postmodernism is characterised by an "incredulity towards metanarratives". In other words, he argues big stories about the world are not believable or sustainable since, at some point their claims to explain "everything about something" are challenged, breakdown or co-exist in an uneasy ignorance of each other. If you think about it, Christianity or Islam can't both be "right" since they explain the same thing (religion) in different ways, just as political philosophies like Conservatism or Socialism offer competing explanations of the social world that are believed (or not believed) by millions of people in our society.

Globalisation: The idea we now live in a *global society* (we no-longer behave in terms of national boundaries) means the way we think about, communicate and interact with people is changing rapidly (think about how easily email lets you communicate with people around the globe).

Globalisation - the world in your hands?

Identity refers to "who we believe ourselves to be" or how we define ourselves and in the past, postmodernism argues, identities were more likely to be:

Were identities in the past more centred? Are identities in contemporary societies more likely to be decentred?

Centred: That is, clear, relatively fixed and certain. For example, in the past people in our society had a much clearer ("*centred*") idea about what it meant to be "a man" or "a women" because there were relatively few choices available to them in terms of the meaning of these categories. The same is true for categories like age, class and ethnicity. In postmodern society, however, things have changed (perhaps) to such an extent we now have a wide range of possible choices about "how to be a man" or "how to be feminine" - an idea that leads to the concept of:

Decentred identity: As the range of possible meanings expand (in terms of sexuality, for example, I can choose to be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, transsexual…) people become *less certain* ("*decentred*") about how they are supposed to behave (think, for example, about the many possible ways you can play the role of student). Under the influence of *globalisation*, categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity are easily combined to create a whole new range of identities (such as some young British Asians defining themselves as *Brasian* – a mix of both British and Asian cultures and identities). If identities are changing, under the influence of choice, we need to consider the idea of:

Uncertainty: The downside to "almost unlimited choice" from which we *pick-and-mix* our identities is *uncertainty* and confusion about who we are and how we're supposed to behave. The "old certainties" of class, gender, age and ethnicity no longer have much currency in terms of telling us how to behave "appropriately".

Key Criticisms

Choice: One criticism of this idea, as we've seen, is that for the vast majority of people, "choice" is pretty much an illusion – they simply do not have
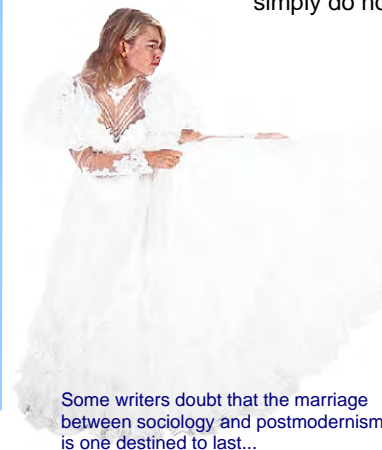
Some writers doubt that the marriage between sociology and postmodernism is one destined to last...

the money, power or resources to exercise choice in ways that significantly change their life.

Identity: Despite the claims of postmodernists, a large number of people in our society still define themselves (or are defined by others) in fairly traditional ways when it comes to categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity.

Disputes: Some sociologists have argued (**Sociology Review**, 1998), the concept of postmodernism is not a particularly useful one when applied to the analysis of social behaviour.

Gershuny for example, argues: "Postmodernists conclude that we have reached the end of the grand theory and that now we must retreat to something altogether less ambitious in our attempts to understand society. My conclusion, by contrast, is that we must search for new theories".

Giddens, on the other hand, disputes the very use of the term "postmodern" when he argues: "I believe we still live in an era of modernity and modernisation" and **Westergaard** offers the following (somewhat scathing) assessment: "In my view, postmodernist approaches constitute neither a theoretical advance - on the contrary - nor even a backward step, but rather a declaration of intellectual bankruptcy".

Structuration

As we've suggested, this type of perspective is based around the idea that it is possible to combine structural and action perspectives in the following way:

Structure and Action: Unlike the previous perspectives (with the possible exception of postmodernism, since this, by-and-large, rejects
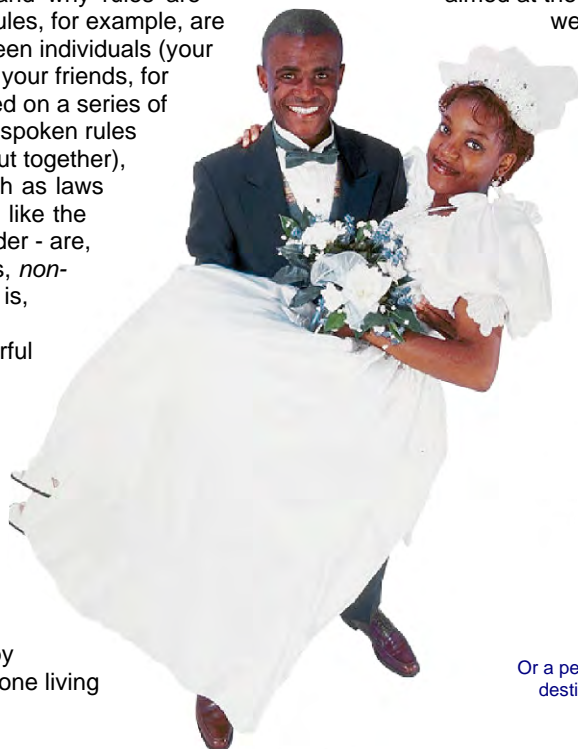
the idea we can think in these terms), *Structuration* argues *both* structure and action are equally significant in terms of our ability to understand human behaviour.

Practices: The key to understanding this perspective is, according to **Giddens** (2003), the idea of *practices* (in simple terms, the things people do). As he explains it: "The theory of Structuration states that the basic domain of social science study is neither the experience of the individual nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but *social practices*. Through social activities people reproduce the actions that make these practices possible"

Structuration theory

A marriage of (in)convenience between two incompatible perspectives?

In other words, as people develop relationships, the rules they use to govern their respective behaviours are *formalised* (as norms, for example) into *practices* – in effect, routine ways of behaving towards each other. Once we start to think of the huge range of practices surrounding our lives we start to develop a sense of structure to the social world, which necessarily involves:
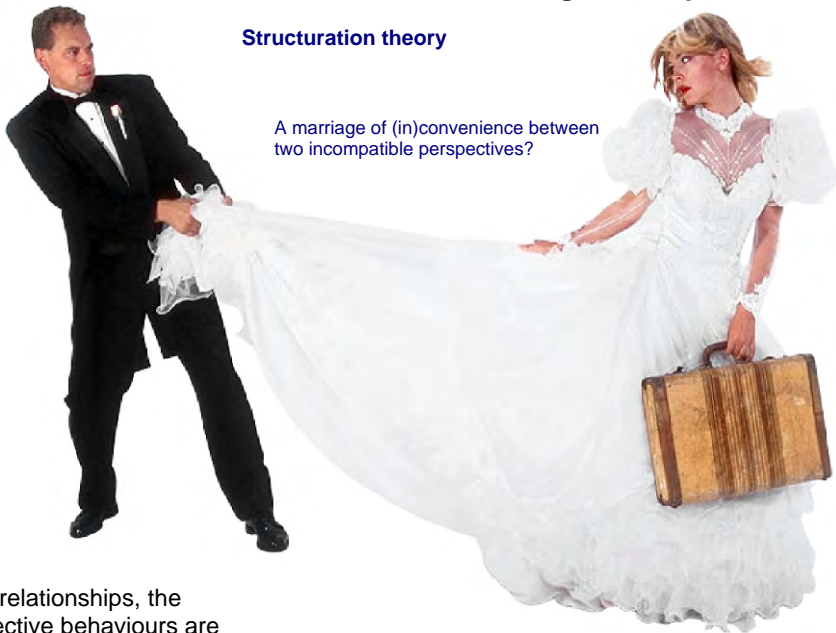
Rules: This concept is important here since it suggests both the way our actions create behavioural rules and the idea such rules become *externalised* (they seem to take on a life of their own, outside of our immediate control and separate from our individual behaviours). In effect, therefore, although we may be involved in rule-making behaviour, such rules "reflect back" on our behaviour in ways that suggest or demand conformity.

Resources: This idea refers to concepts like *power* and relates to how and why rules are created. Some rules, for example, are *negotiated* between individuals (your relationship with your friends, for example, is based on a series of unwritten and unspoken rules you've worked out together), but others – such as laws governing things like the definition of murder - are, in some respects, *non-negotiable*; that is, some rules are created by powerful groups and are simply imposed on people - whatever your opinion about the European Community, for example, many of its rules apply to the United Kingdom and, by extension, everyone living there…

Key Criticisms

Power: One possible criticism of Structuration is that it doesn't sufficiently take account of the way power in society is unequally distributed (the rich may have more power than the poor, men more power than women and so forth). The practices of the powerful may become entrenched, in the sense they are beyond the ability of the powerless to change. In other words, the relatively powerless do not, through their everyday practices, "create society"; rather, it is through everyday practice that people *experience* the power of "society".

Structure or Action: A number of criticisms have been aimed at the (plausible, it has to be admitted) notion we can easily combine these two very different types of idea:

Clegg (1989), for example, argues that although Structuration theory talks about structure *and* action being equally significant, **Giddens**, in effect, considers human action as being considerably more significant.

Similarly, **Layder** (1987) argues Structuration gives very little attention to the concept of social structures as "determinants of action". In other words, there is little sense that social structures (as opposed to human practices) can have very much affect on people's behaviour.

Or a perfect partnership that's destined to last?