AS Sociology

Revision Mapping

Sociological Perspectives

Introduction to the Nature of Social Thought

Social structure and social action
Conflict and consensus
Macro and micro perspectives

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Social behaviour is governed by rules (informal norms and formal laws) that surround and limit choices of behaviour. Every social relationship (family, school, work etc.) involves roles that, in turn, involve values and norms associated with the role - in combination these provide a behavioural framework for our lives.

Chess illustrates the difference between Structure (the physical boundaries of the playing area for example) and Action (players, for example, are free to choose their own particular strategies within the game). While social structures limit choice of action (in chess play is bounded by certain rules), actions may modify social structures (“breaking the rules” - deviance - may produce changes in the organisation of society).

Everything we say or do means something to both ourselves and others. No form of behaviour is ever meaningless.

Negotiations: Interaction involves different levels of negotiation - from situations where no negotiation is involved (people are ordered to do something) to situations where they are able to “discuss” (in the widest sense) the meaning of their actions and how others should interpret them.

Action involves knowledge of how our behaviour might impact on people at whom it’s directed. Conversations, for example, involve social action - how you behave is influenced by how the other person behaves and vice versa.

Behaviour differs from action in the sense it doesn’t involve knowledge of how it impacts on others - a barking dog, for example, influences the behaviour of other dogs but the dog has no awareness of how its behaviour influences others.
Introduction to Sociology

**Functionalism**

Systems involve the idea of things working together - harmoniously - and being dependent on each other.

An easy way to visualise this perspective is in terms of society being like a human body. Both the human body and social systems consist of interconnected parts.

**Organismic analogy**

The human body, for example, is a system in which the various parts (heart, lungs, brain and so forth) work together to form a living thing. In a similar way, all the different parts of a social system (family, school and so forth) are interconnected and work together to form a society.

This perspective focuses on consensus; everything in society has both a purpose (what it exists to do) and needs (things it requires from other parts of the system in order to function). Social systems, therefore, fit together on the basis of institutional purposes and needs.

**Needs**

**Purpose**

For example, for a family 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; to fulfil its purpose, work needs the family group to produce socialised human beings.

**Solidarity**

Social systems as imagined communities. A society cannot exist without its members working together and feeling they have things in common (for example, a sense of “Being British”). To promote solidarity, people have to be integrated into the institutions and culture of their society and every society (or group) develops integrating mechanisms (such as a common language) to achieve this.

**Sub-Systems**

**Economic**

Solving the problem of survival; how to organise people into economic (work) relationships to produce the things (food, shelter, etc.) necessary for human survival.

**Political**

Solving the problem of order involves finding ways of governing and controlling people. The political sub-system exists to ensure the “rules and values of society” are maintained.

**Cultural**

Solving the problem of socialisation - how to ensure children are socialised in ways that allow them to grow into functioning adult members of society.

Solving the problem of social integration; how to make people feel they have things in common (belonging to a society, sharing a common culture, etc.). Cultural institutions (schools, religious organisations, the media and so forth) exist to develop cultural values.

**Social Change**

Why does anything in a society change if it performs an essential function? Does Functionalism simply support to the status quo?

Some things can be dysfunctional (dangerous or damaging to society). Example, although crime can have a solidarity function - uniting people against a common (criminal) enemy - too much crime can leave people feeling uncertain about the rule of law and their own safety.

Is there too much emphasis on the “beneficial aspects” of social institutions and groups?

At what point does something become dysfunctional?

**Problems**

A statement that contains its own proof (and cannot be disproved). Example, the Functionalist claim “If something exists in society, it has a function” is supported by the argument that “It is functional because it exists…”.

**Dysfunction**

**Tautology**

Parsons (1937): Every social system consists of four huge institutions (or “functional sub-systems”), each of which performs a different, but related, set of functions based on certain “problems” faced by every known society.
Economic behaviour is the most important activity in any society; all other forms of social activity (politics, family, culture...) cannot exist without people first having secured the means to their survival. How work is socially organised is the key to understanding how all other relationships are organised.

Owners want to keep as much of their profit as possible.

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

Involves grouping people in terms of their “relationship to the means of production”. For Marxists, two basic classes exist in any Capitalist society:

**Bourgeoisie**

A ruling or upper class: Those who own the means of production.

**Proletariat**

A lower or working class: People who own nothing but their ability to work.

Conflict is limited by the ability of a ruling class to impose their interests on other classes through force (what Althusser (1968) calls these “Repressive State Apparatuses” (RSAs) such as the police and armed forces) and socialisation (using “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) such as the media and the education system).

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. No advanced industrial societies have ever been economically, politically or ideologically organised around communist principles.

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).
Not all gender relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation and the general position of women in our society has improved over the past 50 years.

The main cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination in a competitive, Capitalist society, men are encouraged to exploit any ‘weaknesses’ in women’s market position (e.g. pregnancy) to their own advantage.

The social and economic exploitation of women is justified through powerful ideas about masculinity and femininity.

Patriarchal ideas, attitudes and practices (such as sexual discrimination) are produced and reproduced through differential socialisation.

Housework is unpaid labour that is exploitative and mainly benefits men. Barrett and McIntosh (1982): Women part of a “reserve army of labour”.

Patriarchy both pre-dates Capitalism and is a feature of all known human societies, not just class-based (Capitalist) societies.

The relative position of men and women has changed and continues to change. Female lives, for example, have changed dramatically over the past 50 years in terms of family responsibilities, educational achievements and work opportunities.

Critical Realism
Discrimination occurs 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.

Men and women have similar ‘long-term’ interests - the replacement of an exploitative, patriarchal, Capitalist society with an equal, non-patriarchal, Communist society. How likely is this to occur in our society?

Men and women have fundamental psychological differences. All known human societies have been - and remain - male dominated and liberation can only come about through the overthrow of patriarchal ideas and practices.

Sex Class
Women are a class (based on a common gender) with its own experiences and interests. Female liberation involves the overthrow of the ruling sex class (men).

Differences in male and female psychologies are the product of gender socialisation rather than innate.

Female life chances are not necessarily very similar; differences exist in terms of both social class and ethnicity - do women have common interests?

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**Feminism**

**Liberal**

**Dual Role**

**Legal System**

Women’s dual role (as both carers within the family and paid employees) is a major area of inequality. Need to change male attitudes to family life and develop anti-discriminatory laws and practices. **Example**: Affordable child-care for working women.

**Status**

**Problems**

**Life Chances**

Ignores differences in the life experiences of women; working class women do not have the same advantages as upper class women; black women have different life experiences and chances to white women.

**Post-Feminism**

Promotion of equal opportunities for men and women (the chance to compete equally in the workplace, for example) and the outlawing of all forms of sexual discrimination.


Legal changes not always effective in changing discriminatory attitudes.

Legal equality is not the same as status equality. Women still treated in ways that assume they are inferior to men. In the UK women earn, on average during their working lifetime, 80% of male income – even when doing comparable work.

**Choice**

Men and women have a range of “gender choices” available in contemporary societies and can construct gender identity in any way they choose.

**Anti-Essentialism**

Rejects idea of fundamental (“essential”) differences between males and females - both biological and psychological (how men and women think, act and feel). **Butler** (1990): Essentialism mistaken for two reasons:

- Women are not a sex class - their interests converge and differ in various ways.
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“Cutting across categories or boundaries”. Identity transgression involves women, for example, adopting traditionally “masculine” behaviours (e.g., Ladettes). Traditional concerns of feminism (patriarchy, equality and so forth) now redundant. As society has changed so too have notions about gender.

**Transgression**

**Performance**

**Problems**

**Choice**

“Cutting across categories or boundaries”. Identity transgression involves women, for example, adopting traditionally “masculine” behaviours (e.g., Ladettes). Traditional concerns of feminism (patriarchy, equality and so forth) now redundant. As society has changed so too have notions about gender.

**Backlash**

Most women’s lives are not characterised by unlimited choice, freedom and individual self-expression. **Coppock** (1995): “The irony is...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”.

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**Butler**: Gender is we do rather than something we are. It involves a range of social processes; some similar (gay men displaying “traditional female traits” or women displaying traditional masculine traits) and some different.

For women with enough money, a massive range of behavioural choices exist. For those with little or no money, behavioural choices are more restricted. Class, age and ethnicity impact on the choices open to both men and women.
The social world is created by the “meaningful interactions between people”.

Labelling shows how Interactionists view social structures as forms of social interaction. Labelling theory, for example, argues that when we name something (such as categorising people by age or gender) we associate the name with a set of characteristics, our knowledge of which is used to guide our behaviour.

Example: “Police officer” is a label with a range of associated characteristics that vary in terms of how individuals define a particular situation.

Because meanings are negotiated (argued over) both society and culture can rapidly change. Interactionists don’t see society as a “thing” acting on our behaviour (since it has no objective reality outside of social interaction); society is a convenient label we give to the pressures, rules and responsibilities that arise out of social relationships.

Although our actions create behavioural rules they become externalised (take on a life of their own, separate from our individual behaviours). Although we may be involved in rule-making behaviour, such rules “reflect back” on our behaviour in ways that suggest or demand conformity.

These represent “the things people do” – we structure the world through our (routine) actions. Giddens: As people develop relationships, the rules of their behaviour are formalised (as norms, for example) into practices – routine ways of behaving towards each other. The huge range of practices surrounding our lives translates into the structure of the social world.

These refer to concepts like power and relates to how and why rules are created. Some rules are negotiated between individuals but others – such as laws – are non-negotiable (created by powerful groups and imposed on people).

Structure and action are equally significant for the understanding of human behaviour.

If meanings only develop through interaction they can change fairly easily.

Example: The meaning of being “masculinity” and “femininity” has changed in our society quite dramatically over the past few years.

Social interaction is based on shared “definitions of any situation”. If people do not share the same - or very similar - definitions interaction becomes difficult or impossible.

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”.

Although Structuration theory talks about structure and action being equally important, Giddens sees action as considerably more significant...

Layder (1987): Structuration pays little attention to structures as “determinants of action”. There is little sense that social structures (as opposed to human practices) can have very much affect on people’s behaviour.
Narratives (or stories) are central to understanding social behaviour; people’s lives are viewed as a seamless web of interlocking narratives which we define and move between at will. Social life, therefore, consists of a multiplicity of different narratives.

We live in a global society and no-longer think or behave in terms of national boundaries. How we think about, communicate and interact with people is changing rapidly, with unforeseen consequences for social and economic organisation (such as the changing nature of work).

“Who we believe ourselves to be” or how we define ourselves. In the past, identities were clear, relatively fixed and certain. Example: Clearer (“centred”) ideas about the meaning of masculinity in the past because there were relatively few choices available to men. In postmodern society, there exists a range of possible choices about “how to be a man”; this leads to uncertainty and identities that are:

- Centred
- Decentred

As the range of possible meanings about something (like sexuality or lifestyle) expand, people become less certain (“de-centred”) about how they are supposed to behave. The globalisation of culture, for example, involves categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity being combined to create a new range of identities. Example: British Asians defining themselves as Brasian – a mix of British and Asian cultures and identities.

Economic, political and cultural globalisation has created almost “unlimited choice” in terms of how people live their lives. Choice extends from goods and services, through lifestyle choices to areas like sexuality (from heterosexual through homosexual to transgendered).

For the majority of people in any society “choice” is an illusion - they do not have the money, power or resources to exercise choice in any significant way. Postmodernism ignores the ways choice is socially produced.

Large numbers of people in our society still define themselves (or are defined by others) in traditional ways when it comes to categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity.

“Big stories”, culturally constructed to explain something about the nature of the social / natural worlds. Examples: Religions (Christianity or Islam) and political philosophies (Socialism or Conservativism).

Lyotard (1986): Postmodernism characterised by an “incredulity towards metanarratives” - 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 uneasily.