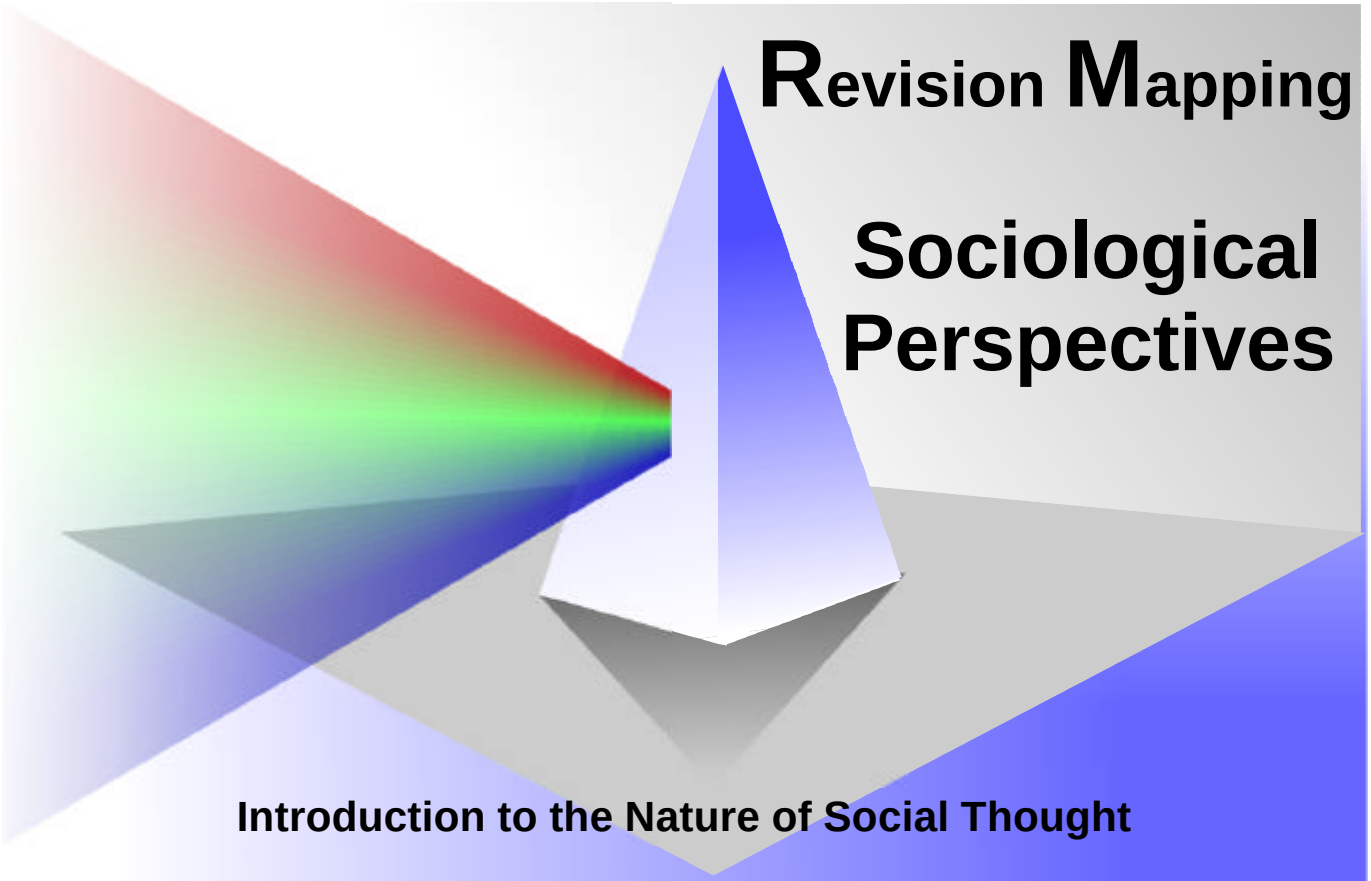
AS Sociology



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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Structure

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.

Jones (1987): For Structuralists, society is "A structure of (cultural) rules".

Haunting

Meighan (1981): Social actions are always surrounded by the g*hosts of social structures*. We are *haunted* by things we cannot see but which affect our behaviour.

Synoptic Link
Meighan's concept "haunting" can be applied to our understanding of the role and purpose of the education system.

Examples

Classroom interaction haunted by:

Physical environment (conducive to learning?)
Knowledge being taught (e.g.. Theoretical or practical)
Language of education (do elaborated codes favour the middle classes?).
Demands of employers (are qualifications the only educational objective?)

Chess ilustrates the difference between **Stucture** (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).

Synoptic Link
Crime and Deviance
The relationship between structure and action is demonstrated by **Merton's** "Strain Theory" of deviance.

Society as a "*framework of rules*".
A *rule* is something you're supposed to obey and a *framework* is the way rules are created, maintained and policed.

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

Meanings

Behaviour is constantly open to interpretation, both by ourselves and others. Interpretation reflects back on meaning (how we interpret the behaviour of others depends on what it means to us) and negotiation (it's possible to change the way people interpret behaviour).

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.

Interpretations

Negotiations

Goffman

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.

Action

Focuses on our ability to make choices about behaviour - about obeying or disobeying rules, for example.

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.

Weber

Behaviour

Action

Functionalism

Organismic analogy

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.

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

Social System

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.

Society as a "warm bath" surrounding the individual...

Needs

Purpose

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.

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

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

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.

Family

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

Cultural

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.

Problems

Social Change

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

Dysfunction

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?

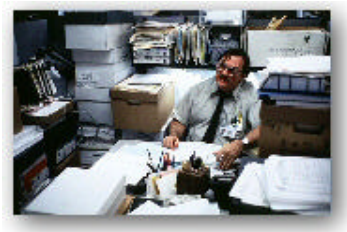
Tautology

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…".

Marxism

Work

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.

Competition

Competition is inevitable in Capitalist society and for Marxists, economic forms of competition and conflict are most significant (although competition occurs throughout society - between individuals, classes, genders, ethnicities...).

Capitalism

Social Class

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.

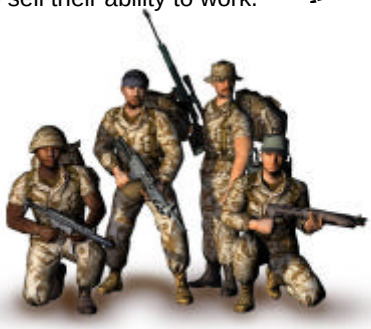
Conflict

The workplace is a key area of conflict in any society because of the way it is organised. In Capitalist societies the "*means of economic production*" (things like factories, machinery and land) are owned by one *class* (the *Bourgeoisie* or Ruling Class). The majority, on the other hand, own little or nothing and so are forced to sell their ability to work.

Class Conflict

The primary and most fundamental form of conflict in Capitalist society. Other forms (gender and ethnic, for example) are secondary forms that stem from class conflicts.
Example: Because competition is a fundamental principle conflicts occur over things like access to resources, power differences and the like.

Power



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).

RSA's - as represented by men with very big guns...

Problems

Determinism

Is work is the most important institution in society? While this may have been true in the past, some postmodern writers argue this is no longer the case. Consequently, they question the significance of social class as a source of identity.

How has the working-class changed over the past 100 years?

Communism

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.

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).

Feminism

Class inequality

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.

Social Class

Men and women are not separate (sex-based) classes - upper class women, for example, have more in common with upper class men.

Marxist

Patriarchal Ideology

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

Socialisation

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

Domestic Labour

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

Problems

Patriarchy

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

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?

Social Change

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.

Radical

Spheres

Public and Private
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.

Patriarchy

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

Woman 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).

Matriarchy

Men are the "sex class enemy" of women - they have exploited women throughout history. To end exploitation women must establish a *matriarchal society* - one where women dominate men - and some radical feminists advocate lesbian relationships as the basis of female liberation.
Rich (1980): '*Compulsory heterosexuality*' - male-female relationships are the basis of patriarchy and therefore the source of male domination.

Problems

Essentialism

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

Sex Class

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

Oppression

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.

Feminism

Liberal

Equal Opportunities

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 System

Promote *anti-discriminatory* laws to redress the historical gender imbalance.
UK Examples: *Sex Discrimination Act* (1975) made workplace discrimination illegal. *Equal Pay Act* (1970) made it illegal to pay men and women different rates for same work.

Dual Role

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.

Problems

Attitudes

Legal changes not always effective in changing discriminatory attitudes.

Status

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.

Life Chances

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.

Post-Feminism

"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".

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.
- Rejects usefulness of categories like "man" and "woman" - they involve more differences than similarities.

Choice

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

Performance

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.

Transgression

"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

Problems

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".

Choice

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.

Interactionism

The social world is created by the "meaningful interactions between people".

Meanings

This perspective stresses the importance of *meanings* (what we each understand by something) that work on two levels.

Change

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.

Definitions

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.

Labelling

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.

Negotiation

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.

Problems

Structures

Failure to explain how individual meanings, definitions and interpretations are affected by social structures.
Example: The fact of being black in a racist society will have consequences for how social reality is defined from both the perspective of the majority and minority ethnic groups.

Individualism

The emphasis on individuals, meanings and interaction ignores how social structures impact on our lives. By focusing on the *social-psychological* aspects of social life, Interactionists fail to explain adequately how and why people behave in broadly similar ways.

Power

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".

Structuration

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

Rules

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.

Practices

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.

Resources

This refers 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).

Problems

Power

Structuration doesn't take account of how power is unequally distributed (in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age and the like). The practices of the powerful may become entrenched and beyond the ability of the powerless to change. The powerless do not, through their everyday practices, "create society"; most people *experience* the power of "society" through the "everyday practices" of the powerful.

Structure Or Action?

Clegg (1989): 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.

Post Modernism

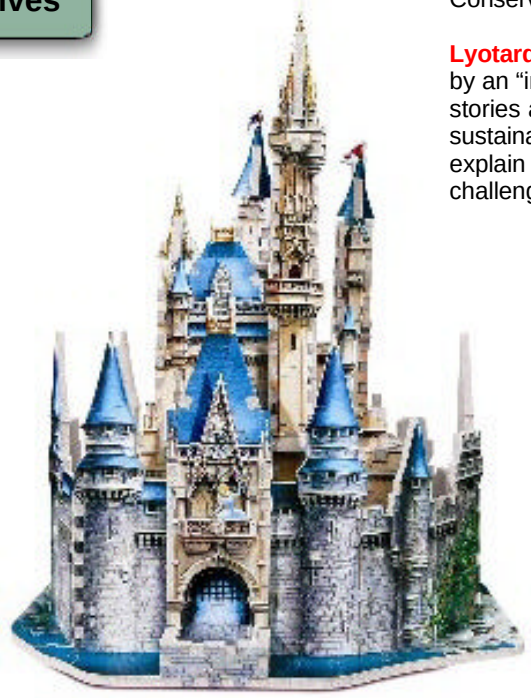
Narratives

Narratives (or stories) are central to understanding social behaviour; people's lives are viewed as a seamless web of inter-locking narratives which we define and move between at will. Social life, therefore, consists of a multiplicity of different narratives.

Metanarratives

"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.



Globalisation

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).

Choice

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).

Identity

"Who we believe ourselves to be" or how we define ourselves. In the past, identities more:

Uncertainty

The downside to "almost unlimited choice" (from which we *pick-and-mix* our identities) is confusion about who we are and how we're supposed to behave. The "old certainties" of class, gender, age and ethnicity no longer tell us how to behave "appropriately". Fear (at having made the wrong choices) is a feature of postmodern society.

Centred

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:

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.

Problems

Choice

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.

Identity

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.