

QUALIFICATION	A Level Sociology
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Textbooks	<div data-bbox="493 331 764 669" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="791 439 1003 472">Required Year 1</p> <div data-bbox="497 878 761 1240" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="938 1184 1238 1218">Optional revision guide</p>

Task 1: Sociological theories

Use pages 73-82 to gain an understanding of the key sociological theories you will be studying. A theory is a perspective or a way of looking at and seeing something. When we talk about the sociological theories, therefore, we are talking about the particular way those sociologists view society. Read and make notes on the following theories. Functionalism

- Marxism
- Feminism
- New Right
- Interpretivism
- Postmodernism

Do some extra research on some of the 'key thinkers' and their contributions to sociological debates.

Where do sociological theories come from?

Do you know when different sociological theories emerged? Explore our useful guide to theories in context

One really important skill to acquire as a sociology student is the ability to understand where, when and why important social theories emerged. Exam boards often state that students fail to see sociological ideas as being located in any kind of historical context at all. In fact, a frequent error that even very able students make is to assume that all theories exist in the same way at the same time.

This is simply not the case of course, and although you are unlikely to get a question which directly asks you about the history of sociological theories, by understanding and applying this sort of knowledge you will be able to pick up important marks.

You are certainly likely to be asked how useful a particular theory is today. To understand whether ideas are relevant to contemporary society, it helps to know how dated the ideas are. This article explains what is meant by placing theories in context.

Placing theories in context

The word 'context' here means something specific: it means that you are able to show awareness of the time and place in which a particular theory came about and how that set of ideas may have changed over time. It means you can identify whether the theory emerged in response to a specific social change, or a social problem, or in response to other social theories.

Theories generally reflect or reject some of the ideas and assumptions of the time when they emerged, so this is also worth thinking about. For example, early theories emerged when women were not allowed access to higher education. So theories were almost always created by men, from a male perspective.

The next section of this article explores the specific context of the main theories in sociology, in chronological order.

Functionalism (modern, consensus, macro, structural)

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) is considered a founding father of sociology. Durkheim wanted to establish sociology as a scientific discipline which was similar to the natural sciences; one that could establish 'social facts' which could lead to identifying the causes of social problems, as well as being able to resolve them.

He wrote at a time when most people had shared values and before the advent of many of the rapid technological and social changes which followed industrialisation. His work was developed further by Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton and the so-called 'March of Progress' thinkers. Some of these ideas arguably laid the foundations for New Right thinking today, which applies some aspects of conservative and traditional ideas to the wider society (e.g. believing that gender roles are based on biological functions).



Bra-burning protest in 1970s USA

Evaluation

People no longer share core values in a globalised world where there is much greater cultural diversity. Traditional values, such as those regarding gender roles, are being contested. Early functionalists tended to be white, middleclass, middle-aged men, whose views were partly shaped by these shared characteristics. However, shared values and beliefs are still of importance in holding some social groups together, so in this respect functionalism still has relevance today.

Marxism (modern, conflict, structural, macro, political movement)

Karl Marx (1818–83) was among the first theorists to explain society in a critical way. He saw the industrial revolution as leading to the rise of industrial capitalism, creating a society which he saw as very exploitative of the working class. Marxist ideas were further developed by Friedrich Engels, followed by Althusser, Gramsci and others, some of whom are known as Neo-Marxists (new Marxists) as they adapted Marx's ideas to reflect changes in society. Marxist ideas about class also inform Left Realist theories, for example about the causes of crime.

Evaluation

Is capitalist society the same as it was when Marx wrote? Identity today may be shaped not just by social class but also by ethnicity, gender and age. Marxist ideas also tend to assume that capitalist society gets more and more unequal until a revolution occurs and then we move into a communist society. This has not been the case in Western society and has largely failed where it was established (the former USSR, for example). However, although capitalism has changed, it remains central to the organisation of many societies and Marx's insights into the way that capitalism works are still seen as valuable by many sociologists.

Feminism (modern, conflict, structural, macro, social movement)

Feminist theories emerged as a direct response to the lack of women and women's views in modern social theory. They also reflect the social movements of the time. There are many types of feminism, and you are expected to know about four to five types, arising from the social movement in the 1960s onwards. The general trend over time has been that feminism has become more aware of the differences *between* women rather than being reductionist and talking about 'all women' as if they all share the same experiences. Types of feminism include Radical, Liberal, Marxist, black, postmodern and difference feminism.

Evaluation

Perhaps some types of feminist theory ignore the positive changes occurring for women. There has been a backlash against feminism among younger women, and the lack of inclusion of men in feminism has become an issue, as men are in some ways also negatively affected by oppressive patriarchal ideology. However, women remain disadvantaged compared with men in many ways in most, if not all, societies and feminism continues to research and explain these significant inequalities.

Interpretivism (late modern, agency/action, micro)

Interpretivist theory focuses on the importance of the small-scale meanings which can help explain wider social phenomena. Its ideas are based on the early work of Max Weber (1864–1920). Also important was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), the founder of symbolic interactionism. These ideas were further developed by later modern theorists (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s) such as Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel and Howard Becker (labelling theory) who sought to explore the effects of socially constructed meanings in a more contemporary context.

Evaluation

Interpretivist theories often ignore how social factors affect individuals in ways they cannot identify or control. These theories never claimed to provide solutions to social problems, as other theories have sought to do. However, they continue to be very useful for understanding small-scale, everyday interaction, such as that which takes place in school subcultures.

Postmodernism (post-modern, post-structural)

Postmodernism is the most recent major theory, emerging in the 1980s. It asserts that we are now in a society which is no longer modern. Therefore, a new post-structural theory is necessary to explain the social world. This theory departs from others in that it rejects any kind of total explanation; rather, it simply reflects on the characteristics of the contemporary global world. In many respects, therefore, this theory is best placed to explain society today. This position has been developed by sociologists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ulrich Beck, Margaret Stacey and others.

Evaluation

Postmodernism typically ignores the continuing importance of social structures which affect people, such as overwhelming social/economic inequalities. Unlike other theories, it offers no solutions to social problems. However, postmodernism does help to understand aspects of fluid and rapidly changing social worlds today and it takes account of the impact of globalisation.

Box 1 Key terminology

Social theories are a set of ideas and explanations which help explain why things are the way they are, as well as social change in society.

Structural theories tend to assume the individual is passive.

Agency/action theories tend to ignore the influence of structural factors such as social class.

Modernity describes the period of time after society was industrialised, when identity was relatively stable and fixed, with shared values.

Postmodernity denotes a period of time when consumption becomes more important than industrial production, no one belief system is dominant and society is characterised by more fluid and complex identities, choice, fluidity, multiculturalism and risk.

Task 2: Thinking more about Sociological theories

Read the article above and note down some responses to the following questions

1. What is the significance of sociological theories in understanding society?
2. How do sociological theories contribute to our understanding of human behaviour?
3. Who are some influential sociologists that have developed theories about society?
4. What are the key factors that influence the development of sociological theories?
5. How does historical context shape the emergence of sociological theories?
6. What role do personal experiences play in the formation of sociological theories?
7. How do sociologists gather evidence to support their theories?
8. Are sociological theories influenced by cultural or societal biases?
9. What is the relationship between sociological theories and social change?
10. How have advancements in technology affected the development of sociological theories?
11. What are the different types of sociological theories, and what distinguishes them from one another?
12. How do sociologists build upon existing theories to create new ones?
13. Are sociological theories universal, or do they vary across different societies?
14. Can sociological theories ever be completely objective, or are they always influenced by the researcher's subjectivity?
15. How do sociological theories evolve and adapt over time?
16. How do sociological theories contribute to social policy-making?
17. What are some critiques of sociological theories, and how do sociologists respond to these criticisms?
18. How can individuals apply sociological theories in their everyday lives to better understand society?

Task 2: Sociology media report

Having gained an understanding of Sociological theories, select two media stories that might be of interest to a Sociologist. This could include anything relating to topics such as families, education, the media, crime, poverty or culture. Write a short report on each story to include the following:

- Introduction (with title, background information to the story)
- Summary of the story
- Links to sociology, using *examples*.
- Links to specific sociological *theories*



Task 3: What makes us human?

What makes us Human? **Think** about your answers to the questions below:

- Are we meant to live alone?
- What would a person be like if they grew up without human contact?
- What would a person be like if they were then introduced into a society?
- Do we need a society in which to survive?
- Can someone be truly human if they grew up without human contact?
- Are we ruled by our instincts? (An instinct can be defined as a complex, unlearned pattern of behaviour that is universal in a species).

Sociology recognises that as members of society we have to learn 'human' behaviour and this is done through a variety of social institutions and social groups right throughout our lives. Sociologists challenge the focus on the 'nature' side of the debate theories for two particular reasons. Firstly, people acted differently in the past from the way that they do today. They had different ideas and different beliefs. If it were 'natural', we would see little change in human behaviour throughout History. Furthermore, anthropology is the study of different human societies. Wherever you go in the world, people act differently from the way they do in Britain. This suggests again, that human behaviour cannot simply be 'natural' as it would be the same the world over.

What makes us human?



Enjoy this series of Podcast on the topic of 'What makes us Human?'

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02nrw9m/episodes/downloads

Select a number of different episodes on the podcast and consider whether any of them change the view you had on your answer to 'What makes us human?'. Do any of these views link to sociological theories?