

2.5 Social theories

When you write an essay on social theory it is important that you show that you understand what type of theory you are discussing, as well as the context from which it emerged.

Types of theory

REVISED

Consensus vs conflict

- Consensus theories take the view that there is largely agreement in society on shared values, which means that society works in harmony; for example, functionalism.
- Conflict theories are based on the idea that society is based on inequality between different groups, which results in conflict or disagreement; for example, Marxism and feminism.

Structural vs social action

- Structural theories claim that social forces shape behaviour and that individuals are generally passive in the process; for example, Marxism and functionalism.
- Social action theories argue that society is the product of small-scale interactions in which individuals have free will in deciding and negotiating their position in society. In other words, people have agency; for example, interpretivism.

The concepts of modernity and postmodernity in relation to sociological theory

Sociology emerged in a period of time when there were significant changes occurring in society. Sociology, in fact, attempts to make sense of these changes.

These key changes reflect the fact that society has shifted from modernity to postmodernity.

Globalisation is the shortening of distance and time, as there is greater contact made possible through technological advances. This results in sharing of ideas, money flow and people being brought into contact more easily.

Metanarrative is an overarching set of answers to questions that a theory can provide.

Table 2.10 Modernity and postmodernity: key changes

Modernity (approx. 1900–80)	Postmodernity (1980 onwards)
Industrialisation	Post-industrial society
Secularisation – religion plays a declining role in society	Religious pluralism, greater choice in types of religiosity as well as non-religious belief systems and the possibility of believing in several belief systems at once
Science and rational thought begin to be seen as important	Science becomes questioned in some areas and alternative explanations are explored (despite the fact that science is still seen as very important)
Stability in family life	Instability (risk) and choice in family relationships, a greater choice in family structures and relationship arrangements
Mass education, industrialisation mechanises many processes which were previously carried out by people	Rapid development and use of technology
Globalisation occurring, at a slow rate	Globalisation occurs at a rapid rate, which results in greater flow of ideas, movement of people and awareness of cross-cultural practices and ideas
Identity is relatively fixed and simple	Complex identities, fragmentation of identity
In sociology, metanarratives were seen as able to explain society, e.g. science, functionalism, Marxism	In sociology, postmodernists suggest that metanarratives are no longer useful in understanding a society where ideas are much more fragmented and fluid

Typical mistake

Students often describe theories as if they all exist at the same time. Instead, you should evaluate the theory in terms of when it first emerged, which may help you explore how relevant the theory is to understanding today's society. For example, Marx died in 1883; however, his ideas continue to be relevant and explored and interpreted by neo Marxists.

Exam tip

Where appropriate, it is a good idea to place theories into a context, in other words explain where the theory emerged and if it is macro, micro, consensus or conflict.

Functionalism

- Functionalism is a macro, structural, consensus theory.
- Functionalists argue that there is value consensus in society and this is maintained by various interrelated institutions which all work together. They draw an analogy with the human body – all organs work together to make the body function.
- Occasionally parts of society do not function and this results in anomie or a lack of norms in society. This is not always a bad thing; for example, small amounts of crime act as a deterrent to others and this acts as a form of boundary maintenance.
- The family, education and religion all play an important role in primary and secondary socialisation which functionalists see as a centrally important process.
- Functionalists take a 'march of progress' view – this is the idea that society is improving all the time.
- Through industrialisation, Parsons (1951) claims that structural differentiation occurred, which means that institutions became increasingly specialised, which benefited individuals. This idea ties in with the functionalist 'march of progress' idea, in that it assumes change is generally positive.
- Functionalists take a positivist view of research, claiming that it is possible to establish social facts and therefore be able to identify solutions to social problems.

Key thinker: Émile Durkheim

Durkheim makes the assumption that people act in their own interests – they need to be socialised to share values and co-operate so that society works effectively. He stresses the importance of developing a collective conscience, which is a widespread agreement on norms and values, as well as moral beliefs which bind people together and build a sense of people feeling part of a group (social solidarity) or social cohesion (where people live together in society without tension). Agencies of socialisation are crucial in integrating individuals into society which is based on consensus, harmony and social order.

Key thinker: Talcott Parsons – the GAIL model

Parsons argued that for society to work, certain things or prerequisites need to be in place, and these include:

- **Goal attainment** (how society sets its goals, e.g. through the political system)
- **Adaptation** (how society organises basic needs, e.g. through the economy)
- **Integration** (making sure we are all socialised into the same values, e.g. cultural or community organisations)
- **Latency** (to ensure people have somewhere to deal with stress and tension, e.g. the family and kinship).

Key thinker: Robert Merton

Merton wanted to improve Parson's ideas and show that sometimes, in complex society, not all functions are positive. Inadvertently, sometimes positive functions produce unintended effects:

- Manifest functions: institutions have a positive effect, e.g. you go to hospital to get better.
- Latent functions: unintended negative effects of society, e.g. people are sent to prison as a form of punishment, but an unintended consequence is that they may learn how to commit more crimes.

Evaluation**Strengths:**

- Shows how institutions have positive and interrelated functions.
- Explains the increasingly specialised functions of each institution and how these benefit the individual and society.
- Shows how institutions adapt to change over time.

Weaknesses:

- Overly optimistic about the beneficial effects of society.
- Assumes that there is value consensus where often there is not.
- Many ideas were developed a significant time ago when society was more homogenous and it does not take into account the impact of increasing multiculturalism and globalisation.
- Ignores the negative functions of society such as persistent structural inequalities.

New Right

- Known as 'political functionalism' yet not quite a social theory, this group of politicians, public figures and policy-makers argues that society is generally beneficial for individuals, while raising some concerns about the loss of traditional values.
- This set of ideas takes the view that the family is the cornerstone of society.
- The New Right raises concerns about the breakdown of the family in recent years and the loss of individuals taking responsibility for themselves and their families, relying instead too greatly on what they deem an over-generous welfare state, leading to a culture of dependency, increases in juvenile crime and ultimately a breakdown in society.
- The New Right advocates reducing the role of the state, getting tough on crime, as well as returning to traditional values and discipline in the family, education and wider society.

Key thinker: Charles Murray

Murray coined the term 'the underclass' – a group of people who are unemployed and rely on state benefits. He argued that individuals should take responsibility for themselves and that the state should not intervene in family life. Murray also argued that an overly generous welfare state leads to a 'culture of dependency', which acts as a 'perverse incentive'. In other words, people begin to rely on benefits rather than go out to work.

Key thinkers: Norman Dennis and George Erdos

Dennis and Erdos explore the importance of the father in family life and explain that boys, in particular, need male role models. If male role models are not present within traditional families, boys are likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and possibly turn to crime.

Evaluation**Strengths:**

- Highlights the over-reliance on the state by small numbers of the population.
- Identifies issues within certain parts of society and implements policies to try to overcome these. For example, the 'troubled families' policy initiative to try to tackle families where no one works and dysfunctional family life.

Weaknesses:

- Tends to blame the victim and ignores the fact that many people cannot get out of poverty, despite trying.
- Feminists criticise the New Right view that 'traditional' gender roles are best for children, claiming that these are patriarchal views.
- Marxists argue that the New Right policies actually increase inequalities while claiming to produce a 'fair' society.

Marxism

- Marxism is a conflict, structural, macro theory.
- Marxists believe that the economy shapes society and that capitalist society is unequal.
- Marxists see society as being based around class differences; two social classes: the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat).
- According to Marxists, the ruling class control, exploit and brainwash the working class who provide wage labour.
- Marxists argue that the ruling class create a particular ideology which is imposed onto the working class, known as hegemony, which makes them accept the capitalist system and prevents the system being challenged.
- Marxists argue that the working class are not aware of the true extent of their exploitation (false class consciousness) but as things become progressively worse, they will come together and overthrow the system, which will be replaced with socialism and communism, societies based on greater equality and no private property.

Key thinkers**Karl Marx**

Marx wrote during the height of the industrial revolution and was deeply pessimistic about the values of capitalism which he saw as greed, competition and the pursuit of profit by the bourgeoisie at the expense of the working class. His ideas were very powerful politically.

Friedrich Engels

Engels explained how the family upholds capitalism through male inheritance practices, keeping the wealth among the wealthy and by treating women as private property, to be owned.

Louis Althusser

Althusser focused on the way various institutions such as the family and education function as ideological state apparatus, encouraging the working class to accept the system and become docile workers rather than challenge their own exploitation.

Antonio Gramsci

Gramsci focused on hegemony, the idea that the ruling class develop ideologies which are imposed upon the working class. These powerful ideas prevent revolution and ensure that capitalism is maintained.

Althusser and Gramsci also feature in the Neo Marxism section.

Evaluation

Strengths:

- The first critical theory which explains the huge and persistent inequalities in society.
- Marxist ideas illustrate the power of the economy in shaping relationships and ideas as well as offering a solution or alternative society.
- Marx's ideas were so influential that in fact a third of the planet was ruled under his ideas in 1900.
- Many Marxist ideas are relevant today as we see capitalism spread around the world; it may even be possible to see how developing countries have become the new proletariat.

Weaknesses:

- Marxist ideas focus on social class, which many argue is becoming less relevant than other parts of a person's identity, such as ethnicity and gender.
- The communist revolution did not happen universally and where it did occur, it wasn't seen as being particularly successful.
- Many argue that society has become fairer, e.g. through the expansion of the welfare state offering free healthcare and education for all.
- Marxist ideas fail to consider the fact that social mobility can and does occur, the working class can increase their life chances.

Neo Marxism

- Neo Marxism accepts that some of Marx's ideas are out of date or problematic.
- Neo Marxists show that ideas created by the ruling class are applied to the working class through religion, the media, law, education and the family in ways which makes them difficult to challenge.

In certain circumstances, neo Marxists show how it may be possible for the working class to create changes in the economy through ideas. For example, oppressed people in Latin America used religion (ideas) as a force for change and greater equality, a process known as liberation theology.

Key neo Marxist thinkers

Antonio Gramsci

Gramsci emphasises the importance of the power of ideas in shaping society, rather than just the economy alone. Gramsci argued that, in fact, ideas have 'relative autonomy' from the economic base.

Gramsci argued that the state maintains its power through hegemony, ruling class ideas imposed onto the working class to make sure they do not challenge the system.

Gramsci argues that people can use intellectual ideas to produce a collective struggle and change society, e.g. liberation theology.

Louis Althusser

Althusser argues that society consists of three levels:

- The economic level
- The political level
- The ideological level (ideological state apparatus)

Althusser argues that these three levels preserve and justify the capitalist system in various ways. Althusser, like Gramsci, argues that ideas are important in changing society; however, the economy remains very important in shaping society.

Evaluation

Strengths:

- Updates Marxist ideas and makes these more applicable to contemporary society.
- Acknowledges the power of ideas in shaping the economy, thus avoiding the criticism that they are economic determinists, i.e. they see society as being shaped by the economy alone.

Weaknesses:

- The focus on class may be less relevant in a society in which other parts of a person's identity may be more relevant, e.g. their ethnicity and gender.
- Post-structuralists and postmodernists argue that neo Marxism relies on a structural approach to society which is no longer relevant to society today.

Feminism

- Feminism is a conflict perspective which sees inequalities in society as being based on gender.
- Feminism is not a unified perspective; although feminists agree on the fact that society is characterised by patriarchal ideology, they also form many different views on the causes of female oppression.
- There are many types of feminism including: radical, liberal, difference, postmodernist and Marxist.
- Feminists regard sociology as being, until recently, malestream, which means male dominated.

Feminists are part of a broader social movement which has led to changing laws, the introduction of social policies and greater awareness about the need for equality between men and women.

Feminists reject aspects of sociological research sometimes in favour of feminist methodology. This is characterised usually by the idea that to truly understand women's views, the researcher must be a woman and her role would include her seeking to collaborate with those she is researching, resulting in women's greater confidence and self-awareness.

Key thinkers: Liberal feminists

Liberal feminists are optimistic about women gaining equality with men, and believe that with changes in the law and changing attitudes, this is possible within the existing structures of society.

Liberal feminists challenge the idea that biological differences between men and women should shape their roles. They also reject the idea that assumptions should be made about men and women on the basis of these differences.

Example: Oakley

Key thinkers: Radical feminists

Radical feminists argue that patriarchy is inevitable and bound to existing structures of society. Radical feminists argue that all relationships contain gender politics (assumptions about men and women that place women in a disadvantaged position in society). Radical feminists argue that there have to be radical changes to society before a positive change for women is possible.

Example: Firesmith

Key thinkers: Marxist feminists

Marxist feminists see women as dually oppressed through capitalism and patriarchy. Within capitalism, women are perceived as cheap labour, a reserve army of labour and to provide a cushion for men to vent their frustration with the capitalist system.

They argue that in order for things to improve, capitalism and patriarchy need to be challenged.

Example: Barrett

Key thinkers: Difference feminists

Difference feminists argue that women cannot be reduced to one 'type' and that there are many types of women who need to be understood in their individual contexts. In other words, they reject essentialism.

This includes the work of post-structuralist feminists such as Butler (1992), who argues that gender and biology are cultural constructs.

Example: Butler

Evaluation**Strengths:**

- Highlights and explains continued gender inequalities in society.
- Draws attention to the processes involved with gendered socialisation.
- Suggests practical and policy solutions to the problem of female oppression.
- Acknowledges the ways in which women experience other forms of oppression, such as through their class and ethnicity.

Weaknesses:

- Fails to address the issue of male oppression, e.g. the fact that women commit domestic violence as well as men.
- Tends to assume all women feel oppressed when they may not; deterministic.
- May fail to acknowledge the improvements in the position of women, e.g. in education.
- May ignore inequalities based on other dimensions such as class and ethnicity.

Interpretivism

- Interpretivism is based on the assumption that individuals have free will (agency) and can negotiate their position in society.
- Interpretivists believe that sociology is about uncovering meanings.
- Interpretivism takes a micro approach, arguing that small-scale qualitative research is preferable.
- Interpretivism regards validity as the most important quality in carrying out research.
- The labelling theory (see Chapter 1, page 14) which has been usefully applied in a number of areas, e.g. education, crime and deviance, was developed by interpretivists.
- Ethnomethodology, the methodological approach which encourages the researcher to see the strange in the familiar, was developed by interpretivists.
- Interpretivism developed in late modernity so may be more appropriate to contemporary society.
- There are two key strands to this theory: symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Table 2.11 Interpretivism theory: strands

Strand	Definition	Explanation	Key Thinkers
Symbolic Interactionism	The idea that people use symbols in everyday life to reveal meanings	Labelling theory, dramaturgical analogy (the idea that people act out particular roles in life as if they were on a stage)	Mead, Blumer, Goffman
Ethnomethodology	The idea that people need to be understood by changing their behaviour from a 'norm' and recording what happens.	An approach to researching from an interpretivist theoretical perspective. This branch of interpretivism explores different ways of doing sociology, introducing small scale detailed ethnographic methods.	Garfinkle, Atkinson

Key thinker: Weber

In his classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explores the way that small changes in meanings lead to wider scale changes. In this case, small-scale changes linked to Calvinism led to the emergence of capitalism.

Weber focuses on the importance of small-scale qualitative research, and argues that it is not possible for people to be objective.

Key thinker: Becker

Becker was a key thinker in developing labelling theory, which has been usefully applied in education, crime and deviance. He also developed some important ideas in terms of the processes involved with meanings being attached to behaviour, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Key thinker: Goffman

Goffman focuses on the method or approach that encourages the sociologist to explore how people make sense of their world. He asks people how they interpret their own view of the world. Goffman argues that social order is actually a set of culturally embedded rules and assumptions which are shared.

Key thinker: Blumer

The symbolic interactionist Blumer argues that there are three characteristics of interaction:

- 1 People act in terms of symbols, including words, objects, expressions or gestures which represent meaning, e.g. hand gestures, body language.
- 2 These meanings are a product of interactions, which are flexible, e.g. these change over time and from culture to culture.
- 3 Meanings are developed from people trying to understand how they are seen by others. For example, people get a reaction from a gesture they make and this helps them to understand what is seen as normal.

Evaluation**Strengths:**

- Does not treat the individual as passive and acknowledges the way that individuals have consciousness and free will.
- Explores powerful processes such as labelling over time rather than exploring issues in a snapshot way.
- Highlights important ways in which individuals define behaviour through socially constructed labels.

Weaknesses:

- Deterministic, e.g. labelling theory assumes that individuals accept the labels given to them.
- Ignores structural constraints on people's behaviour, e.g. the impact of social class.
- Interpretivist research tends to be small scale and therefore is hard to generalise.
- The theory does not offer any solutions to societal problems, it simply offers observations.

Postmodernism

- Postmodernism argues that modern theories are no longer relevant in understanding society.
- It explains recent change in society.
- It does not make assumptions about society as positive or negative.

- Postmodernism explains the impact of globalisation and the increasing role of technology.
- It focuses on increasing individualisation and the impact of globalisation.

Key thinkers

Beck

Beck describes the rapid changes as leading to what is known as 'risk society'. Beck argues that the increase in choices available to us results in greater instability.

Stacey

A feminist postmodernist, Stacey describes the recent increases in choice available to women in particular as being beneficial, particular for women who can use this increased choice to create better family life.

Baudrillard

Baudrillard argues that knowledge is central to postmodern society, which comes in the forms of signs which do not necessarily reflect reality. He calls these signs simulacra. He points to the ways in which the media represents these signs in what he calls hyper reality, where signs seem more real than reality.

Giddens

Giddens argues that it is important to take a post-structuralist approach to society in which there is increasing individualism. This is reflected in personal relationships, e.g. where people now expect emotional fulfilment, known as a 'pure relationship'.

Evaluation

Strengths:

- Provides a more contemporary approach to society that acknowledges the recent changes in society such as rapid globalisation, the role of technology, migration.
- Acknowledges changes in society such as the increasingly complex factors involved in the creation of identity.
- Helps explain changes without being deterministic.

Weaknesses:

- Lacks solutions to social problems.
- Ignores structural constraints which still affect people such as those linked to social class, gender and ethnicity.
- Lacks empirical data to back up the claims.
- The theory is contradictory – it rejects any idea of a large set of overarching explanations of society, or metanarrative. However, it is a metanarrative in that it claims there is no metanarrative.

Exam tip

In an exam, use structuration as an evaluation of theoretical views. Explain that although sociologists have a theoretical perspective in reality they may well draw from both structural and agency-based approaches.

Structuration

Although this section would appear to suggest that sociologists tend to take one theoretical approach, the reality is much messier; in fact, sociologists sometimes combine structural and agency-based ideas in what Giddens calls 'structuration'.

An example is law changes that might be understood through structuration.

Structuration is an approach in which theorists acknowledge the influence of social forces, but at the same time are able to explore how individuals negotiate through their social actions.