

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Using Different Theories to Explain Different Topics

Theories are used to understand and organise data, to evaluate data and evaluate other theories. They may be used by the sociologist to decide what kind of information to collect, and what method of research to use, or they may be generated to fit the data after it has been collected. You need to be able to apply theory to every topic area you cover as well as draw on different topic areas in your theory and method exam.

Today many sociologists combine two or more theories in their work in order to get a wider perspective on the data. No one theory is more correct than any other theory, though each makes quite different assumptions.

### Marxist theories

Marxism always assumes a class divide that is unfair, exploitative and oppressive. If this is applied to the **Family** then families exist in order to:

- provide workers for capitalist industry
- socialise new generations into capitalist ideology
- provide a consumer market purchasing basic needs and leisure items.

The profits from these purchases go to wealthy capitalists and business owners. A trip to Alton Towers or Disneyland is not really about 'family fun' but about getting people to buy things they do not really need so that they continue working in jobs that give them no real satisfaction.

If we apply the Marxist perspective to **Education** then we look to see how the working classes lose out. They:

- do worse in terms of qualifications achieved than the middle classes.
- are impeded in terms of their ability to study.

External factors show that working class children have less access to material goods such as computers, quiet study space and healthy diets. They also have less cultural capital: they do not have the kinds of language and leisure activities that enable middle class children to succeed in school. Schools are middle class institutions with middle class curriculum and middle class teachers. According to Reay (1998), middle class parents have high aspirations for their children and know how to 'work the system' and get extra help and benefits if these are needed. The school system 'babysits' children so that parents can go out to work, educates the next generation of workers and reproduces capitalist ideology.

### Feminist theories

Feminism always assumes a gender divide which is unfair and disadvantages women; it looks at stereotypes of women which perpetuate this divide. In discussing the **Mass Media**, feminists such as Meehan (1983) would be concerned with the types of roles in which women are presented, arguing that these are likely to be an extension of women's caring, nurturing roles or focus on their appearance and sexiness.



Women are shown to take specific roles in dramas, such as housewife or slut, and women newsreaders or weather reporters are young and attractive. Women are shown as victims, not perpetrators, of violence.

This is partly a result of patriarchal attitudes by editors but also complies with society's stereotypical attitudes. Women are seen to be influenced by the media to be concerned with their appearance and fashion.

In the topic area of **Wealth, Poverty and Welfare** Feminists would look at the feminization of poverty. Women have most responsibility for family, childcare and elderly care, they are also more likely than men to be single parents. This means they are more likely to be unemployed or work part time so they are likely to be lower paid. Mothers are more likely to sacrifice their own needs for the needs of children and will go without themselves. They also live longer than men but because of their history of low paid work have poor pensions so are more likely to live in poverty in old age.

**Exam Hint:-** Convert paragraphs like the one above into flow charts and spider diagrams

There are several types of feminism including Radical Feminists, Marxist Feminists, Liberal Feminists and Black Feminists; each have a slightly different understanding of the causes of women's disadvantage and the types of policies which should be used to address inequality. Masculinist theories focus on the disadvantages experienced by men and stereotypes of masculinity.

### Functionalist theories

Functionalists assume that although there are social divisions and differences these are necessary for society to operate smoothly. The differences are not seen as unfair but as necessary and sometimes as natural. Any institution that exists in society will serve a function in the society otherwise it would not continue to exist. **Religion** has a social function, according to Durkheim (1961), in promoting social solidarity. People come together to celebrate their rituals and in doing so confirm shared norms which reinforce the collective conscience. This binds people to society and provides them with shared meanings. Parsons (1964) argued that religion also provides answers and explanations for painful life experiences, such as bereavement.

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Functionalists see that **Power** in society is justly and appropriately distributed. Durkheim (1988) believed that the state represents the popular will; Parsons (1967) further believed that power is used by the state to promote collective goals. Politicians aim for economic improvement so that everyone's standard of living will rise within the society; people cannot work for the good of all if they work simply as individuals, so some have authority which they use to further the common good.

**Social Action and Interpretive perspectives**

Interpretive approaches argue that we should begin our analysis with the individual not with the society. They are not concerned with social structure in the way the above theories are. Instead they ask why people act as they do and what this means to them. The unit of analysis may be the individual or a small group such as a family. Within **Education** labelling theory demonstrates how individuals can be labelled by teachers and they then may go on to internalise the label and see themselves in the way that the teacher defines them. This approach has been combined with a Feminist (Stanworth 1983) or Marxist (Reay 1998) approach. The hallmark of this is that the methodology involves qualitative methods and often produces quotes from respondents.

*Image school child/ teacher*

In **Crime and Deviance** the classic interactionist study by Jock Young (1977) looked at how the police labelling and treatment of hippy marijuana users in Notting Hill increased their levels of drug use and encouraged the creation of a deviant subculture. Stan Cohen (1980) showed that media labelling of Mods and Rockers in Clacton created a deviancy amplification spiral whereby the police and young people both reacted to the initial labelling with consequent increases in arrests and in increases in deviant activity.

**Post Modernism**

Postmodernists deny the existence of modern society with its traditional industrial organisation and Grand Narratives (particular sets of beliefs such as medical science or traditional religion) and focuses on individual freedom to choice. Media symbols become the means by which people communicate and define themselves but these are ever changing. People create themselves through their lifestyle choices. Bauman (1992) suggests that postmodern society has produced a 'crisis of meaning' whereby no religion any longer offers the solutions to life's problems; according to Heelas (1998) 'self religions' are emerging to fill the belief gap.

Some claim that New Age Movements provide a 'pick and mix' solution to this dilemma.

In the **Family** the traditional family forms (such as the 1950s nuclear family) have given way to family diversity. Stacey (1996) claimed that people can live in whatever family form best fits their needs at any time. This diversity includes a variety of family forms (single parents, gay and lesbian families, extended families) and variety in roles and relationships within the family.



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**Pluralism** is a model that is used mainly in understanding mass media and politics. Power is dispersed amongst many groups each of whom has an effect on society. In **Power and Politics** Dahl (1961) found that policies are normally a compromise position where a number of competing interest groups all have some influence on the outcome. In understanding **Mass Media** pluralists argue that the media caters to a range of different interest and is also driven by consumer demand. The huge range of media provision is a reflection of consumer taste: for example, available magazines cover everything from 'Bollywood Films' to 'the Wisden Cricketer'.

**Exam Hint:** Using theories to comment on any sociological material is a good way to gain A02 marks in your exams

Summary of Theories	
Theory and main concepts	Criticise the theory using claims from other theories
<b>Marxist:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>class divide</li> <li>class inequality</li> <li>oppression</li> <li>exploitation</li> <li>capitalism</li> <li>middle/working class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores gender issues</li> <li>ignores positive aspects of class differences</li> <li>ignores individuals' choices</li> <li>no longer relevant in postmodern society</li> </ul>
<b>Feminist:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gender inequality</li> <li>oppression of women</li> <li>exploitation of women</li> <li>stereotypes of women</li> <li>low pay for women</li> <li>patriarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores class issues</li> <li>ignores positive aspects of gender divisions</li> <li>ignores individuals' choices</li> <li>no longer relevant in postmodern society</li> </ul>
<b>Functionalist:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social differences necessary</li> <li>social solidarity</li> <li>every social institution is functional</li> <li>collective conscience</li> <li>social order</li> <li>value consensus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores class oppression</li> <li>ignores gender oppression</li> <li>ignores individuals' choices</li> <li>no longer relevant in postmodern society</li> </ul>
<b>Interactionist</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social action</li> <li>social roles</li> <li>meanings</li> <li>individuals</li> <li>labelling</li> <li>self fulfilling prophecy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores class issues</li> <li>ignores gender issues</li> <li>ignores positive aspects of class differences</li> <li>ignores social structures</li> </ul>
<b>Postmodernist</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>end of grand narratives</li> <li>diversity</li> <li>construct own identity</li> <li>choice</li> <li>media signs and symbols</li> <li>lifestyle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores class issues</li> <li>ignores gender issues</li> <li>ignores positive aspects of class differences</li> <li>ignores constraints on individuals which limit their choices</li> </ul>
<b>Pluralist</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>competing interest groups</li> <li>any bias reflects public bias</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignores dominance of ruling class</li> <li>ignores dominance of patriarchy</li> </ul>

**Exam Hint:** Try to work out your own application of each theory to the topic areas. You should aim to know what any theory could say about any social issue. Those given in the table below are just a few examples.

**Remember**

**Marxist** – social institutions reproduce ideology, produce new workers and support capitalism

**Feminist** – social institutions reproduce patriarchy (radical feminist) and stereotypes which disadvantage women

**Functionalist** – social institutions maintain social order and teach essential norms and values

**Interactionist** – looks at how individuals or groups behave and the meanings they bring to social experiences

**Postmodernist** – looks at fragmentation of society, diversity and lifestyle choices

**Examples - application to topics****Family**

- **Marxist** – children learn capitalist values, families buy capitalist product
- **Feminist** – children learn to copy gender roles in the family; girls play with dolls, boys do not play with dolls
- **Functionalist** – family teaches essential norms and takes care of each family member, e.g. socialising children.
- **Interactionist** – each family negotiates its own rules and roles and children can socialise their parents into new ideas; meanings and behaviours are different in different families
- **Postmodernist** – no longer one dominant family type but a variety of family forms

**Education**

- **Marxist** – working class children do worse and get fewer qualifications
- **Feminist** – girls are ignored by teachers who learn boys names first and focus attention on boys
- **Functionalist** – schools teach essential skills needed by employers
- **Interactionist** – focus is on individual children in the classroom and their interaction with the teacher or the other children
- **Postmodernist** – different forms of education suit different people, adult education may have gone some way to providing this: leisure classes, open learning, distance learning, modular courses

**Health**

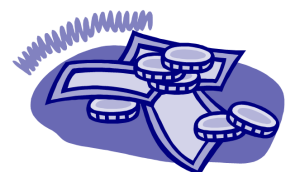
- **Marxist** – health care is just enough to keep workers at work
- **Feminist** – women suffer more ill health, perhaps because of the 'triple burden' (in their role in the family where they do housework/childcare and the emotion work and paid work outside the home)
- **Functionalist** – the 'sick role' provides appropriate care for the sick and helps them to recover
- **Interactionist** – certain individuals receive labels from a medical professional that override their other social roles, e.g. the mentally ill
- **Postmodernist** – diversity in health care is available, a pick and mix of scientific medicine and complementary practices

**Work and leisure**

- **Marxist** – the worker is alienated and forced to accept boring or repetitive work in order to live
- **Feminist** – women are concentrated in lower paid, lower status work
- **Functionalist** – all work contributes to the economy and pay differentials encourage the brightest to study for the most skilled and valuable jobs
- **Interactionist** – a case study of a particular company showing how workers interpreted changes to their working environment in the run up to sabotage or strike
- **Postmodernist** – individuals buy whatever products and services appeal to them, the division between work and leisure may disappear

**Wealth, Poverty and welfare**

- **Marxist** – the upper classes continue to dominate the boards of directors of major companies
- **Feminist** – women continue to have lower wages because of vertical and horizontal segregation in workplace
- **Functionalist** – the existence of poverty means that there are people who will do the undesirable, low paid jobs
- **Interactionist** – a case study showing how individuals feel about and cope with unemployment
- **Postmodernist** – differences in wealth distribution cease to have social meaning as our reality is the 'hyper-reality' created by the media



## Examples - application to topics

**Mass Media**

- **Marxist** – capitalists own and control the mass media, only certain stories are broadcast
- **Feminist** – women are presented in a small range of stereotypical roles
- **Functionalist** – media spreads information and creates shared norms and values
- **Interactionist** – individuals interact with the media and interpret it according to their own experiences
- **Postmodernist** – diversity of media forms and interests to suit all tastes
- **Pluralist** – the media is a fair representation of what consumers want

**Religion**

- **Marxist** – religion disempowers people and stops them taking action against the status quo
- **Feminist** – women are excluded from positions of power in many religions
- **Functionalist** – religion promotes shared norms and values; replaced by new shared practices such as supporters of football teams
- **Interactionist** – a case study looking at the meanings and experiences people find in shared religious experiences or a small religious group
- **Postmodernist** – a diversity of new types of religious practices and experiences are available, people choose what best suits them at any given time

**Power and politics**

- **Marxist** – the ruling class dominate politics and control industry, all decisions by the state are ultimately in capitalism's best interests
- **Feminist** – women are still under-represented in politics and on boards of directors, those who make it sacrifice feminine interests and follow the male status quo
- **Functionalist** – the state acts in the best interests of everyone, power is distributed democratically
- **Pluralist** – the state mediates between a variety of groups each with different interests
- **Postmodernist** – diversity has led to the breakdown of traditional class divisions so traditional voting patterns have disappeared and new social movements are gaining in importance linked to individuals' identities

**Crime and deviance**

- **Marxist** – middle class crime may be trivialised and often goes undetected or unpunished
- **Feminist** – women are less likely to commit crimes because of their socialisation into femininity (which discourages deviance), social controls and because the 'triple shift' involves them in a commitment to conform
- **Functionalist** – a certain level of crime is functional as it serves to reinforce social values against perpetrators and public condemnation reinforces norms
- **Interactionist** – labelling theory shows that particular types of individual are seen as likely criminals by police
- **Postmodernist** – the media absorbs subversive elements of youth subcultures and turns them into style or fashion statements which can be used by anyone of any age, class or ethnicity

**Glossary**

- **Feminism:** patriarchy, triple shift, male-stream
- **Marxism:** capitalism, ideology, bourgeoisie, proletariat
- **Functionalist:** consensus, meritocracy
- **Interactionist:** labelling, self fulfilling prophecy
- **Postmodernism:** diversity, hyper-reality, fragmentation
- **Pluralism:** competing groups, representation

All exam boards require you to know the different sociological theories and will expect you to apply these to the different topic areas throughout the specification. Some example exam questions are listed below. Practice explaining different topics from different theoretical perspectives.

**Exam Hint:**

- Make sure that you know which questions require you to analyse and evaluate.
- To evaluate ask yourself how you can criticise each claim you make and then spell out the criticism, with a sociological example if possible. Then indicate which is the stronger claim and why. Do not simply make one claim and then an opposing claim as this will not earn you evaluation marks.
- Make sure you have understood the question and apply your evaluation to the question given.

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