

5 Features of Social Action

1	Social structures are a social construction created by individuals. Not a separate entity above them.
2	Voluntarism, free will and choice of people to do things and form their own identities rather than being dictated by social institutions.
3	Micro Approach, focus on individual or small groups rather than large scale trends.
4	Behaviours are driven by beliefs, meanings and feelings people give to the situation they are in, or the way they see things.
5	The use of interpretivist methodology in order to uncover the meanings and definitions individuals give to their behaviour.



Key Thinker

Max Weber

	Micro Approach means that the sociologists are looking at the individuals in society and how they shape the world around them
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	Verstehen means empathy. To fully understand social groups you have to be able to 'walk in their shoes'
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Summary of Social Action Theory

Weber believed that in order to fully understand society you need to use a combination of both structural and action approaches.

Example: The Protestant Work Ethic

Structural cause: Protestant reformation, introduced a new belief system – Calvinism. This changed people's worldview and therefore their behaviour.

Subjective Meaning: work took on a religious meaning, glorifying God through labour and aestheticism. Making them the first modern capitalists.

2 levels of sociological explanation

1	Cause: explaining the structural factors that shape people's behaviour.
2	Meaning: Understanding the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their actions.

4 Types of Action

1	Instrumental Rational Action: Social actors work out the most efficient way to achieve a goal. E.g. the most efficient way to make profit is to pay low wages.
2	Value Rational Action: Action towards a goal that is seen as desirable for its own sake. E.G. Believing in God and completing rituals in order to reach salvation.
3	Traditional Action: Routine, customary or habitual actions that are done without thought or choice; more like "we have always done this"
4	Affectual Action: Action that expresses emotion. Weber saw this as important in religious and political movements with charismatic leaders who attract followers based on emotional appeal. E.g. weeping with grief or violence caused by anger.

Evaluation of Weber

Alfred Schutz	Weber's view of action is too individualistic and doesn't explain shared nature of meanings. For example a student raising their hand in class, THEY mean they have a question or answer, but Weber doesn't explain how the teacher and other students also know what is meant by this gesture.
Application	It is difficult to apply these ideas as meaning can be misinterpreted or reinterpreted by different individuals. E.g. The Trobriand Islanders exchange gifts called 'Kula' with neighbouring islands. This could be seen as either a traditional action as it has been done for generations or it could be seen as an instrumental rational action because it cements
Verstehen	It is never possible to truly put yourself into the shoes of another person, therefore we cannot really know or understand their motives.