

Sociology - Year 12 to 13 Summer Independent Learning 2022

Introduction

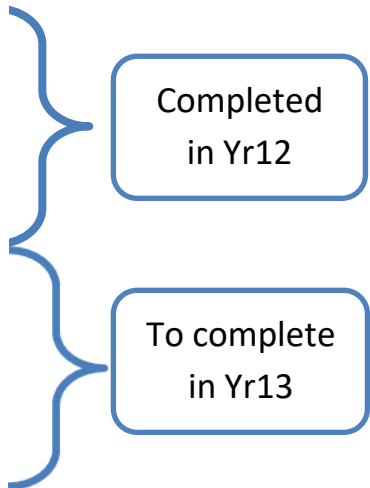
One of the topics you study in A Level Sociology is “Theory and Methods”. This topic appears on both Papers 1 and 3 of your AQA Sociology exams in June 2022. In April/May, you learned about the “Methods” that sociologists use to do their research. In Sept/Oct we will be learning the “Theory” part. This builds on the knowledge you have already gained from learning about the theories in Family/Education, and also the Methods topic.

The specification detail – Theory and Methods:

4.1.3 Theory and Methods

Students must examine the following areas:

- quantitative and qualitative methods of research; research design
- sources of data, including questionnaires, interviews, participant and non-participant observation, experiments, documents and official statistics
- the distinction between primary and secondary data, and between quantitative and qualitative data
- the relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of ‘social facts’
- the theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research
- consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories
- the concepts of modernity and post-modernity in relation to sociological theory
- the nature of science and the extent to which Sociology can be regarded as scientific
- the relationship between theory and methods
- debates about subjectivity, objectivity and value freedom
- the relationship between Sociology and social policy.



Completed
in Yr12

To complete
in Yr13

On the following pages are the first few core handouts for the “Theory and Methods” topic after **1T&M** which was introduced in lessons. You will need copies of these in your folders in September.

Complete the work and tasks in this booklet on additional paper.

Functionalism: A structural and consensus approach

2T&M

Learning Objectives

- Understand the functionalist perspective.
- Understand the views of different functionalists – Durkheim, Parsons, Merton.
- Evaluate the functionalist perspective.

Introduction

Functionalism is a structural theory that focused on the needs of the social system as a whole and how these needs shape all the main features of society – from the form that social institutions such as the family take, right down to the behaviour patterns of individuals and the roles they perform.

Functionalism is also a consensus theory. It sees society as based on the basic consensus or agreement among its members about values, goals and rules.

Functionalism is a modernist theory of society and shares the goals of the Enlightenment project. Functionalists believe that we can obtain true knowledge of the functioning of society and that this knowledge can be used to improve society.

Functionalism has its origins in the work of one of the earliest sociologists, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim believed that society contains a “**collective conscience**” – a shared set of norms and values – which creates a feeling of “**social solidarity**” amongst individuals. This results in societies which are ordered and stable.

This idea was developed by later sociologists in the 1940s and 50s to create the theory of “functionalism”. Functionalists believe that society is a social system based on **consensus** (agreement).

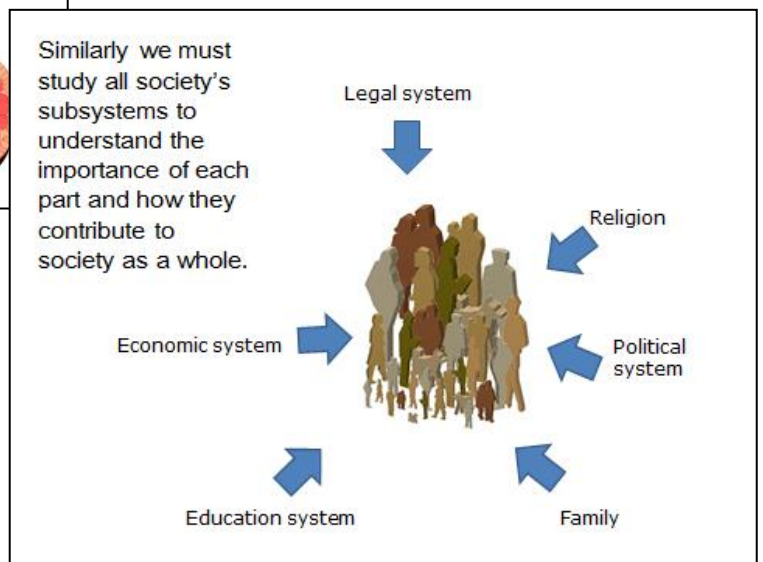
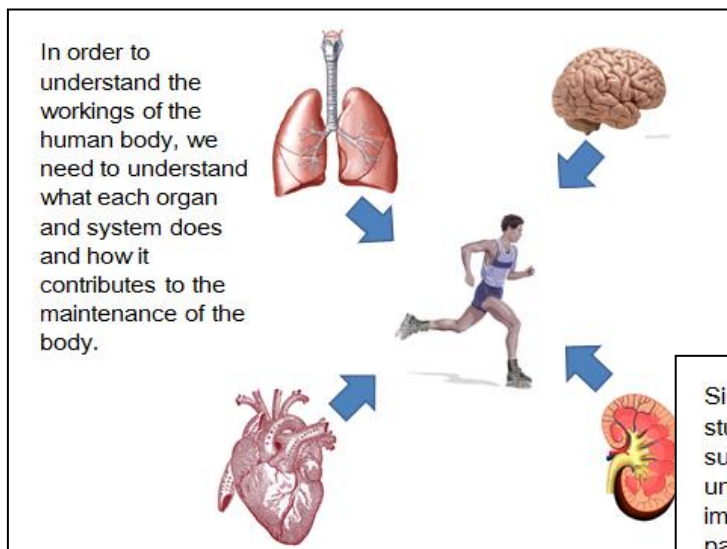
The theory begins from the assumption that society has certain basic needs which must be met if it is to survive. Firstly, there is a need for **social order** – a smooth running, well ordered society in which people know what is expected of them. This social order requires a certain degree of cooperation and **social solidarity** (social unity). This is made possible through **shared norms and values** which are passed down to members of society through **socialisation** and reinforced through **social control**.

The Organic Analogy – Herbert Spencer

Functionalists believe society is like a living organism. Every part has its function but each part is interrelated with other parts.

Parsons identifies three similarities between society and a biological organism:

1. **System:** organisms like the human body, and society, are both self-regulating systems of inter-related and interdependent parts that fit together in fixed ways. In the body, these parts are organs, cells and so on. In society, the parts are institutions (education, family), individual roles (teacher, father) and so on.
2. **System needs:** Organisms have needs such as nutrition, for example. If these are not met, the organism will die, Functionalists see society as having certain basic needs that must be met if it is to survive. For example, its members must be socialised if society is to continue.
3. **Functions:** The function of any part of a system is the contribution it makes to meeting the system's needs and thus ensuring its survival. For example, the circulatory system of the body carries nutrients and oxygen to the tissues. Similarly, the economy helps maintain the social system by meeting the need for food and shelter.

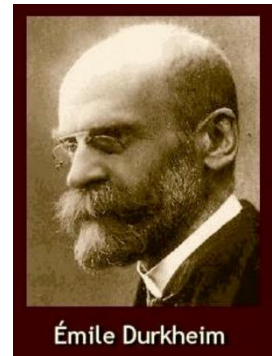


Emile Durkheim 1858-1917

Emile Durkheim was the most important forerunner of functionalism. He was concerned by the rapid social change that was occurring during the transition to modern industrial society. He saw society changing from a simple social structure to one with a complex, specialised division of labour.

Durkheim said that traditional society was based on “mechanical solidarity” with little division of labour and where all its members were fairly alike. A strong collective conscience (shared set of values) bound people tightly together.

However, in modern society, the division of labour promotes differences between groups and weakens social solidarity. It brings greater freedom for the individual, but this must be regulated to prevent too much individualism destroying all social bonds. Similarly, rapid change undermines old norms without creating clear new ones, throwing people into a state of anomie (normlessness) that threatens social cohesion. These ideas are echoed in the functionalists’ concern with social order and value consensus.



Another contribution of Durkheim’s is the idea that society exists as a separate entity over and above its members – a system of external “social facts” shaping their behaviour to serve society’s needs. Durkheim argued that members of society are constrained by “social facts” – “ways of acting, thinking and feeling which are external to the individual”. It is not the consciousness of the individual that directs behaviour, but common beliefs that are outside the individual and shape his or her consciousness.

Social order and human nature

Durkheim argued that society has certain prerequisites (things that are needed), the most important one being the need for **social order**. Durkheim argues this is because of the “homo duplex” model of human nature.

There are two sides to human nature:

- Human beings are selfish.
- Human beings have the ability to believe in moral values.

Society makes use of this second side of human nature in order for social life and society to be possible. This prevents people acting solely in the interests of themselves and instead, are able to follow society’s norms and values to create social order.

The collective conscience and social stability

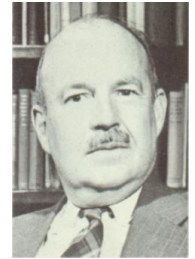
Durkheim argues that it is the **collective conscience** that allows social life to be achieved. I.e. a collective idea about morals and values. It is this which makes individuals act in terms of the requirements of society.

Threats to social solidarity

Durkheim did recognise that there was a possibility of conflict in society. However, he said it could be kept within manageable limits through the teaching of moral values in the education system, and through society functioning in a way which treated all its members fairly.

Talcott Parsons 1902-79

The central question that sociology tries to answer is “how is social order possible?” and “how are individuals able to cooperate harmoniously?”



Parsons argues it is agreement on central values which keeps society together. The “**value consensus**” (shared value system) is passed on through generations through socialisation.

The basic function of the value consensus is to make social order possible – it does this by integrating individuals into the social system, thereby directing them towards meeting the system’s needs. For example, the system has to ensure that people’s material needs are met (food, shelter etc) so the value consensus may include a general value about the need for people to work. To achieve this goal, there also needs to be a set of specific rules of conduct or norms – for example about punctuality, how to obtain jobs etc.

For Parsons, the system has two mechanisms for ensuring that individuals conform to shared norms and meet the system’s needs:

1. **Socialisation:** this is done through the different agencies of socialisation such as the family, education, media and religion.
2. **Social control:** positive sanctions reward conformity while negative ones punish deviance. For example, if the value system stresses individual achievement through educational success, those who conform may be rewarded through qualifications and high paid jobs. Those who don’t may have fewer qualifications and lower pay.

Because individuals are integrated through socialisation and social control into a shared value system their behaviour is orientated towards pursuing society’s shared goals and meeting its needs. The behaviour of each individual will be relatively predictable and stable, allowing cooperation between them. This integration into the shared normative order makes orderly social life possible.

Parsons goes on to argue that societies are made up of 4 subsystems (functional prerequisites) which are needed for it to survive:

Functional prerequisites	Concerned with	Institution
1. Adaptation	Economic production to meet its members’ material needs.	Economic system
2. Goal Attainment	Legitimate use of power through leadership – to set goals and allocate resources to achieve them.	Government
3. Integration	Formal and informal social control	Police, family, media, religion, peer groups
4. Pattern maintenance / Latency	Socialisation and reinforcement of core values	Family, media, religion

All aspects of society and institutions meet at least one of these functional prerequisites. They are functional and keep society going.

Social change

Parsons argues that societies do change over time, but this change is a gradual, evolutionary process. Parsons argued that traditional societies changed gradually into modern societies and as this happens, institutions adapt and develop to meet society's needs. For example, in traditional societies, family and kinship groups perform a range of functions such as education, economic production and socialisation. As these evolved into modern societies, separate, functionally specialised institutions develop to meet different needs, for example the education system, the economic system and so on.

Robert Merton 1968

Criticisms of Parsons comes from both outside and inside functionalism. Within functionalism, the most significant criticisms come from Robert Merton.



Merton argues that we cannot simply assume, as Parsons does, that society is always and necessarily a smooth-running well-integrated system. He argues:

- We cannot assume that everything in society – the family, religion etc – is essential in its existing form. There are possible alternatives, for example single parent families may provide the function of socialisation as well as nuclear families.
- Complex modern societies have many parts that are only distantly related to one another – they may not always be as inter-dependent as Parsons assumes. For example, the values held by religion may not necessarily be connected to those held by the economic system of production.
- Parsons assumes everything in society performs a positive function for society as a whole. But some things may be functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others. Conflicts of interest may arise and some groups may have the power to keep arrangements in place that benefit them at the expense of others. Critics who write from a conflict perspective have developed this idea further.

Therefore, Merton addresses problems in society – conflicts, by allowing for the fact that not everything is functional. This is sometimes known as “strain theory”.

Merton also identified the difference between manifest functions and latent functions.

Manifest functions: the intended function of an institution or action. Merton gives the example of the Hopi Indians who, in times of drought, perform a rain dance with the deliberate aim of magically producing rain.

Latent functions: the ritual may also have an unintended consequence or function – such as promoting a sense of solidarity in times of hardship, when individuals might be tempted to look after themselves at the expense of others.

TASK 1: Answer these questions on the functionalist perspective:

1. Explain in your own words what is meant by the “organic analogy” in functionalism.
2. Explain what is meant by the “collective conscience” and why it is important for society.
3. Explain what is meant by the homo-duplex model of human nature. Which part is more important for society and why?
4. According to Parsons, what does society need to remain stable and ordered?
5. In what ways is Merton a critique of functionalism (despite being a functionalist himself?)
6. What does Merton mean by manifest and latent functions? Give a different example to the one in the text.

For the last two questions, you will need to think more broadly about how other theories might disagree with functionalism...

7. Write a paragraph explaining how a Marxist would criticise a functionalist.
8. Write a paragraph explaining how an interactionist might criticise a functionalist.

Evaluation of Functionalism

Strengths

- This approach shows how a part of society can work at two different levels, both fulfilling the needs of each individual and meeting the needs of the whole society at the same time.
- Functionalists show how each of the parts of society are functional, each contributing to the stability of the whole society.
- It provides a useful focus on the importance of social structure and social institutions like the family or education.

Weaknesses

- Functionalism overemphasises the harmonious nature of society.
- It therefore tends to ignore the conflict stressed by Marxists.
- Similarly, functionalism fails to recognise the importance of power and the dominance of those who have power.
- It takes a politically conservative view, appearing to support the status quo.
- Interactionist sociologists have accused functionalism of being too deterministic seeing people as programmed and socialised by the social system, with little choice of action.
- Postmodernists argue that functionalism tries to create a model of the workings of society as a whole, which is no longer possible because society today is more diverse and increasingly fragmented.

TASK 2: Using the strengths/weaknesses above and the work you did on functionalist theories of the Family (2F) and Education (3Ed), consider the ways that functionalism is useful and helpful in explaining the role/function of family/education in society, and how it is not so useful (how it can be criticised).

Present your work in a table, illustrated below:

	USEFUL	NOT SO USEFUL
Family		
Education		

The New Right Theory

Learning Objectives

- Understand the New Right theory of society.
- Understand the similarities between New Right Theory and Functionalism.
- Evaluate the New Right theory.

The New Right theory developed in the 1980's around the time when Thatcher (UK Prime Minister) and Reagan (US President) were in power in Britain and America. It is often regarded as a political theory, as well as a sociological one and had an impact, particularly on UK and US governments, during that time.

In terms of the economic system, the theory believes strongly in free markets and free enterprise, so it is supportive of the capitalist system. It also believed that there was a great dependency on welfare benefits by certain sections of the population and that this was stifling people's initiative and competitive instincts. The New Right believes people should be encouraged to look after themselves as far as possible and the only way this was going to happen was for the state to become less involved in the workings of industry and welfare.

This theory is particularly associated with the concept of the underclass but in a critical way. It believed that there was a new group in society which was dependent on welfare through their own laziness. I.e. It is the fault of the underclass that they are in that position.

Charles Murray - key New Right Theorist

Charles Murray argued that single parenthood and illegitimacy was bad for society and that the nuclear family was the ideal family type in order to maintain stability in society.

He compared the illegitimacy rates of the "New Rabble" (the underclass) with the "New Victorians" (upper middle class).

Murray admired the New Victorians because he believed they had family responsibility, fidelity, loyalty and discipline. He believed that single parenthood was linked with crime, drug abuse, unemployment and educational underachievement.

Characteristics of the underclass:

- Low skilled working class, poorly educated.
- Single parent families are the norm.
- Dependent on welfare and moonlighting (informal economy).
- High levels of crime, child abuse and drug abuse.
- Great resistance to changing their behaviour.
- Exploit welfare benefit system.
- Unwilling to get a job.
- Children have truancy and discipline problems.

The New Right theory is particularly linked with the concept of the family and much of the political debate during this time was about the breakdown of “traditional” family structures.

New Right theorists believed that the nuclear family was the most desirable family type and that other forms caused social disorder and disruption.

The New Right was concerned about:

- divorce
- more single parent families and children born to unmarried parents
- more cohabitation
- increasing sexual promiscuity.

They believe that these factors contribute to:

- higher crime rates
- juvenile delinquency
- educational failure
- the development of a “dependency culture”.

Similarities with functionalism:

- It focuses on the idea of “shared values” in that it argues we should return to the more traditional values of family responsibility, discipline and hard work.
- It argues that if one aspect of society fails (i.e. the family) then this will affect the rest of society (i.e. higher crime rates, undisciplined children).
- It stresses the importance of the family in socialising children, as functionalism also does. New Right theory points out the problems that happen in society when children are inadequately socialised, particularly in single parent families.

Criticisms of the New Right theory

- The New Right theory blames the poorest sections of society for their own poverty – seeing the underclass as lazy and uninterested in supporting themselves and their families.
- There is a danger that all benefits claimants will be labelled in this way, when many people need state help through no fault of their own.
- Some feminists argue that the New Right theory favours more traditional roles for women, and that single mothers are being blamed for wider problems in society.

TASK 3: Write a paragraph on each of the following:

- What the New Right theory says about the family.
- What the New Right theory says about the education system.

Marxism: a Conflict Theory

4T&M

Learning Objectives

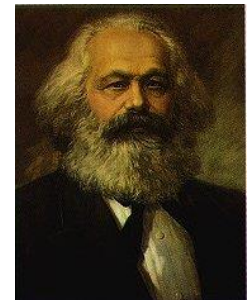
- Understand and be able to criticise the Marxist explanation of society.
- Understand the Neo-Marxist theory, including the views of Gramsci and Althusser. Know some criticisms of Neo-Marxism.

Like functionalists, Marxists also believe that society is a structure or system that shapes individuals' behaviour and ideas. Marxism differs from functionalism in two ways:

- **Conflict of interests:** Marxists reject the functionalist view that the social structure is a harmonious one based on value consensus. Instead, they see it as based on conflict of interests – between social classes of unequal power and wealth.
- **Instability and change:** Marxists also reject the functionalist view of society as stable, and stress the possibility of sudden revolutionary change. Stability is merely the result of the dominant class being able to impose their will on society.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Karl Marx was a German-born philosopher, economist and sociologist. He attempted to explain the social world in which he lived which, at that time, was seeing the development of industrialisation and capitalism.



Marx's theory

1. Historical materialism

Materialism is the view that humans are beings with material needs such as food, clothing and shelter and must therefore work to meet them. In doing so, they use the **forces of production** (or means of production). In the early stages of human history, these forces were just unaided human labour, but over time, people develop tools and machines to assist them. In working to meet their needs, people cooperated with one another – they enter into the **social relations of production** – ways of organising production. As this develops, so does a division of labour. This creates a division between two classes:

- A class that owns the means of production – the ruling class (bourgeoisie)
- A class of labourers – the subject class (proletariat).

2. The history of class societies

Most societies through history have been divided:

- Primitive communism – early human history, where there were no classes, no private ownership and no exploitation.
- Ancient society – based on exploitation of slaves legally tied to their owners.
- Feudal society – based on the exploitation of serfs legally tied to the land.
- Capitalist society – based on the exploitation of free wage labourers.

In capitalist society, the subject class do not own the means of production and therefore can only survive by selling their labour to the capitalist in exchange for wages. According to Marx, this is a system of exploitation and oppression. This is because the workers do not receive the value of the goods that their labour produces, only the cost of their subsistence (keeping them alive). The difference between the two is **surplus value** – the profit the capitalists make by selling the commodities that the proletariat have produced. Competition forces capitalists to pay the lowest wages possible. This produced class polarisation – society divides into a minority capitalist class and a majority working class.

3. Alienation

Marx believed that our true nature as human beings is based on our capacity to create things to meet our needs. Alienation is the result of our loss of control over our labour and its production and therefore our separation from our true nature.

Alienation exists in all class societies, because the owners control the production process for their own needs. However, under capitalism alienation reaches its peak for two reasons:

- Workers are completely separated from and have no control over the forces of production.
- The division of labour is at this most intense and detailed. The worker is reduced to an unskilled labourer mindlessly repeating a meaningless task. The worker is “alienated” from the goods they produce.

4. False consciousness and Class consciousness

Marx believed the subject class were in a state of “false consciousness” in that they were unaware of the exploitation of capitalism.

The reason for this false consciousness is that the economic base of society influences the superstructure of society (the system of values and beliefs). Therefore, capitalism influences what the subject class thinks through society’s institutions. The ruling class have power in all areas of social life and this allows their ideology to be passed down to the rest of society through the superstructure. In other words, what occurs in the economic system directly affects what occurs in the education system, the political system and the legal system (the institutions of society).

Eventually, Marx believed that the polarisation of the classes would lead to the “class consciousness” of the subject class and result in them beginning the revolution. Class consciousness means that the subject class will develop an understanding of the exploitative and unfair nature of capitalism. Marx wished for a “communist utopia” in which everything was shared equally amongst the people.

TASK 4: Evaluation of Marxism

1. Outline how a functionalist might criticise Marxism.
2. Outline how a postmodernist might criticise Marxism.
3. Outline three ways in which Marxism may no longer apply to contemporary society.
4. Briefly outline any other ways we could criticise Marxism.

Neo-Marxism: Humanistic Marxism: Gramsci



Gramsci was the lead of the Italian Communist Party during the 1920s. He developed the concept of **hegemony** to explain how the ruling class maintains its position. He argues the proletariat (subject class) must develop its own “counter-hegemony” to win leadership of society from the bourgeoisie.

He rejects economic determinism as the main explanation of social change. He believes that the change from capitalism to communism will never come about simply due to economic forces (e.g. unemployment and falling wages).

Economic determinism – the idea that the way society is organised is based on the economic system (capitalism).

Instead, Gramsci believes that ideas play a central role in determining whether or not change will actually occur. This is seen through his concept of **hegemony**.

Gramsci sees the ruling class maintaining its dominance over society in two ways:

- **Coercion** – through force (army, police, prisons, courts) – forces the subject class to accept the rule of the ruling class.
- **Consent (hegemony)** – the ruling class uses ideas and values to persuade the subject class that its rule is legitimate and acceptable.

In advanced capitalist societies, the ruling class rely heavily on consent to maintain their rule. They use the institutions such as the media and education to make the rest of society accept their rule. They do this through the spreading of values and ideas that make the subject class accept capitalism (i.e. they consent to it)

Gramsci believed the hegemony of the ruling class is never complete because:

The ruling class are the minority – therefore, they must create a power bloc by aligning themselves with other groups, such as the middle classes. They do this by making compromises to take account of the interests of their allies.

The subject class have a dual consciousness – their ideas are influenced not only by ruling class ideology, but also by the material conditions of their life – poverty and exploitation they experience. This means they can see through the dominant ideology to some degree. There is always the chance of the ruling class being undermined by the subject class as they begin to question the status quo.

Gramsci believed this will only lead to revolution if the proletariat are able to construct a **counter-hegemonic bloc** – in other words, they must be able to offer moral and ideological leadership in society and an alternative to ruling class hegemony.

He believed the subject class can only win this battle by producing their own organised body that are able to formulate an alternative vision of how society could be run.

Evaluation

- The subject class may accept capitalism because they feel they have no choice, not because they accept the leadership of the ruling class.
- Gramsci may underestimate the role of economic factors in developing a revolutionary working class.

Neo-Marxism: Structuralist Marxism: Althusser

While Humanistic Marxism sees humans as creative beings, able to make history through their conscious actions, for Structural Marxists, it is not people's actions but social structures that really shape history. The task of the sociologist is to reveal how these structures work.



Louis Althusser was a leading intellectual of the French Communist Party. He rejects both economic determinism and humanism.

Althusser is critical of Marx's base-superstructure model (the belief that everything in society is shaped by the economic system). Instead, he sees capitalist society as having three levels:

1. The Economic level – all activities that involve producing something to satisfy a need.
2. The Political level – all forms of organisation.
3. The Ideological level – the ways that people see themselves and their world.

In the base-superstructure model, there is only **one way causality** – the economic level affects everything in the other levels. In Althusser's model, the political and ideological levels have relative autonomy or partial independence from the economic level. They are not mere reflections of the economic level, and they can even effect what happens to the economy. Instead of one-way causality, we have **two way causality**, in Althusser's theory.

In Althusser's model, the state performs political and ideological functions that ensures the reproduction and continuation of capitalism. He divides the state into two apparatuses:

1. **The repressive state apparatus:** army, police, prisons – they coerce the working class into complying with the will of the ruling class. This is how Marxists have traditionally seen the state.
2. **The ideological state apparatus:** the media, the education system, the family. These manipulate the working class into accepting capitalism as legitimate and right.

This is similar to Gramsci's idea of coercion and consent.

Althusser's criticism of humanism: Humanistic Marxists believe that people can use their free will to change society. They believed that a revolution will come about as a result of the working class actively choosing to develop class consciousness and actively choosing to overthrow capitalism.

Althusser is critical of this point of view. He argues that we are not free agents. In reality, we are merely the products of social structures that determine everything about us, preparing us to fit into the structure of capitalism.

He argues that change will not come about because of a change in consciousness, but because of a crisis in capitalism. This crisis will come about when the contradictions in the three structures results in the collapse of the system as a whole.

Evaluation

Humanistic Marxists would argue that Althusser's scientific approach discourages political action because it stresses the role of the structural factors that individuals can do little about.

TASK 5: Marxism and Neo-Marxism – Explain the following key terms/concepts:

Karl Marx:

- Capitalism
- Ideology
- Superstructure
- Ruling class
- Alienation
- Historical materialism
- Surplus value
- Polarisation of the classes
- Class consciousness

Gramsci:

- Counter-hegemony
- Coercion
- Consent
- Power bloc
- Dual consciousness
- Dominant ideology
- Counter-hegemonic bloc

Althusser:

- The economic level
- The political level
- The ideological level
- Base-superstructure model
- One-way causality
- Two way causality
- Repressive state apparatus
- Ideological state apparatus

The Relationship between Theory and Methods: Structural theories and Positivism

5 T&M

Learning Objectives

- Understand the relationship between structural theories of society and positivist approaches to doing research.
- Know some of the processes and issues involved in carrying out positivist, scientific research.
- Know some of the research methods used by positivists – their strengths and limitations.

Functionalism and Marxism are Structural theories. This means that they both analyse how society shapes the individual and they focus on the structures and systems of society. Structural theorists are more likely to use Positivist research methods which allow them to examine the big picture.

The **Functionalists** look at the structure of society (value consensus, the organic analogy), and are therefore more likely to take a positivist approach to research e.g. Durkheim.

Marxists also look at structures, focusing on the economic structure of society and how it shapes individuals.

This concept of “structure”, however, has been criticised by other sociological theories such as the interpretivist or social action theorists.

The process of doing scientific/positivist research

Positivist research often follows the hypothetico-deductive model. This is a series of steps which need to be followed when carrying out scientific research. It includes:

1. Hypothesis
2. Carry out the research
3. Data collection and analysis
4. Prove/disprove the hypothesis



Research Methods used by Positivists

- Quantitative approaches: structured interviews/questionnaires
- Statistical comparative methods: official statistics
- Experiments

Features of Positivist Research

- 1. Variables:** Positivist research may involve testing the impact of one variable on another (in a hypothesis). The variable that causes the change is known as the independent variable. The variable that is changed is known as the dependent variable.
So in scientific research, researchers examine the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable.
- 2. Indicators:** A positivist needs to find a way to make these variables clear and easy to classify, otherwise it makes them difficult to test. This is called an indicator.

Blauner carried out a study of alienation in the workplace.

He had to redefine the concept of alienation to make it possible to measure.

He came up with four indicators:

1. Degrees of powerlessness
2. Degrees of meaninglessness
3. Isolation from colleagues
4. Sense of self-estrangement (how they viewed employment in terms of wages rather than job satisfaction)

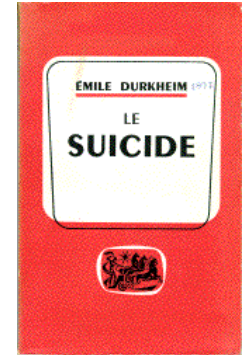
He believed all these were measurable and therefore he could relate the extent of alienation (dependent variable) to the sort of job people did (independent variable).



- 3. Validity:** Positivists are keen to ensure their indicators are accurate reflections of what they are trying to measure. Interpretivists, however, are critical of the validity of positivist research, as they would argue it doesn't uncover meanings behind action.
- 4. Reliability:** Positivists are keen to ensure their work is reliable – can be tested and repeated and the same results found.
- 5. Objectivity:** Positivists believe it is possible to be objective if you use scientific methods. Objectivity means that the research and findings are value-free and impartial.

Emile Durkheim (1897) Suicide [an example of positivist research]

As a functionalist, Durkheim can be regarded as a Structural theorist, focusing on studying society as a system and viewing individuals as the “puppets of society”. He looked at how societies achieve social order by having a shared value system or “collective conscience”. He was also interested in the role of social solidarity and how members felt a sense of belonging to a society.



Durkheim chose to study suicide to show that sociology was a science with its own distinct subject matter. He believed that if he could prove that even such a highly individual act had social causes, this would establish sociology’s status as a genuinely scientific discipline.

Using quantitative data from official statistics, Durkheim observed that there were patterns in the suicide rate. For example, rates for Protestants were higher than for Catholics. He concluded that these patterns could not be the product of the motives of individuals, but were social facts. As such, they must be caused by other social facts – social forces acting upon members of society to determine their behaviour.

According to Durkheim, the social facts responsible for determining the suicide rate were the levels of integration and regulation found in society. Thus, for example, Catholics were less likely than Protestants to commit suicide because Catholicism was more successful in integrating individuals.

Thus, Durkheim claimed to have discovered a “real law”: that different levels of integration and regulation produce different rates of suicide. He claimed to have demonstrated that sociology had its own unique subject matter – social facts – and that these could be explained scientifically.

This makes Durkheim a good example of the relationship between theory and methods – a structural theorist using a positivist method.

A criticism of Durkheim’s approach

J Maxwell Atkinson, an Interpretivist, argues that Durkheim relied on official statistics of suicide which may be flawed. Coroners decide on whether or not a death is a suicide, and they can be wrong. So the statistics come from human decision-making and therefore are not “facts”. This means that the correlations that Durkheim makes between suicide and social regulation/integration in society lack validity.

TASK 6: Complete the following questions on the positivist approach to research methods.

1. Which of these methods is preferred by positivists? (tick all that apply)

- a) Closed-ended questionnaires
- b) Unstructured interviews
- c) Participant observation
- d) Official statistics
- e) Personal and historical documents
- f) Structured interviews
- g) Experiments
- h) Non-participant observation
- i) Structured observation

2. Identify two indicators of the following concepts:

Domestic violence:

Working class:

Emotion work:

3. Which of the following are more likely to have high reliability? (tick all that apply)

- a) Crime statistics.
- b) A personal diary.
- c) An unstructured interview where the respondent is allowed to answer questions in their own words.
- d) An observation of a lesson in a primary school where the researcher takes notes describing what they see.
- e) An observation of a lesson in a school where the researcher uses a structured observation schedule.
- f) An anonymous questionnaire containing fixed response questions that asks young people about drug use.

4. Explain why objectivity is likely to be higher in....

- a) A study that uses questionnaires rather than unstructured interviews.

- b) A study that uses official statistics rather than media reports.

