



## **Making Sense of Sociological Theory Activities and Further Reading**

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# About the Video

This video is designed to support the teaching of sociological theory. It is a resource designed to supplement classroom teaching and illustrate textbook reading.

This video is divided into five sections, of varying lengths. The end of each section is indicated by a **pause**.

- **Introduction: the individual and society**
- **Societies as organic structures**
- **Societies as economic structures**
- **Societies as social action**
- **Understanding and answering theory questions**

Whereas the first video in this series '*Theory and Method*' examined **theories of knowledge**, this video focuses on **theories of society**: that is, general theoretical approaches which provide models of how societies work and change. The content was developed after consultation with teachers, students and examiners.

Rather than attempting to be comprehensive, this video resource looks at three of the major theoretical traditions in sociology to illustrate some general issues of theorising. One of the major aims is to provide material which will enable students to make important links between sociological theories and everyday experiences. Therefore, both analysis from leading sociologists and individuals' own observations on some of their experiences are included.

We recommend that this video, in conjunction with the booklet, is used with students who already have some experience of sociology and is, initially, shown in separate sections over time. However, viewing the video as a whole may well be useful for revision purposes.

This guide will outline the key themes of each section and make some suggestions about questions that can be asked before and after watching each section. A **glossary** of terms students may find unfamiliar is provided at the back.

# 1. Introduction: the Individual and Society

(5 minutes)

This section is designed to support understanding of

- the distinction between social and sociological problems
- sociological theories as models of society
- comparison and evaluation of different theoretical approaches
- the importance of the relationship between the individual and society to sociological theorising

Before watching this section

- Give students a scenario which can be taken from a play or television. (Soaps are always good here). Ask them what they think is happening, in effect, to **theorise** about the situation. Show how **theories** make up much of our conversation.
- Ask students to write down what they think **sociological theory** is about. How is this different from the **common sense theorising** they were engaged in in the first activity?
- What do you think **sociologists** try to do when they study society?

After watching this section

- What is the difference between **social** and **sociological** problems?
- Using crime or drug taking as an example, **illustrate** how these might be seen as a) a social problem and b) a sociological problem.
- How do sociologists view the relationship between the **individual** and **society**?
- Ask students to look at what they had written on **sociological theories**. Has this section changed their views?

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### References:

Most of the established textbooks attempt to give some indication of what theory is but, in our view, the best accounts are to be found in:

Taylor P. et al (1995) *Sociology in Focus* pp 651-699, Causeway Press

Kirby M. et al (1997) *Sociology in Perspective* chapter 1, Heinemann

**Students** may also find the following article helpful as a way of introducing the central importance of theory to all sociology;

Layder D. *Some Misunderstandings about Social Theory* pp 17-20 *Sociology Review* Vol 3 No 3

**Teachers** will find excellent accounts of the development of sociological theory in:

Swingewood A. (1991) *A Short History of Sociological Thought* 2nd edition, Macmillan. *Part I* provides a very clear analysis of the foundations of sociological theory that is far richer than the 'potted' textbook accounts.

Sharrock W. *Individual and Society* in Anderson R., Hughes J., and Sharrock W. eds (1987) *Classic Disputes in Sociology* pp 126-56. An outline and analysis of various sociological approaches to the issue of the individual and society.

## Societies as Social Structures

This section is designed to support understanding of:

- the concept of social structure in sociology
- the idea of societies as organic structures from Durkheim to structural functionalism
- the marxist model of societies as economic structures
- the relevance of organic and economic models to experiences of education

References:

### *On Structure and Action*

In addition to the textbooks, **students** may well find the following helpful:

Chignell H. (1996) *Theory and Methods* pp 1-11, Connect Publications

Craib I. (May 1989) *Structure and Action in Modern Social Theory* pp 195-97 *Social Studies Review*

Chignell H. and Abbott D. (1995) *An Interview with Anthony Giddens* pp 10-14 *Sociology Review* Vol 5 No 2

Best S. (1997) *Agency and Structure in the Writings of Anthony Giddens* pp 23-26 *Social Science Teacher* Vol 26 No 3

A fuller, but clear, general account can be found in:

Craib I. (1984) *Modern Social Theory* Wheatsheaf

For **teachers**, the major contemporary attempts to reformulate the agency/structure issue have come from two of the sociologists interviewed in this video, Anthony Giddens and Margaret Archer.

Giddens A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society* Polity

Archer M. (1988) *Culture and Agency* Cambridge

An earlier and still influential work is

Berger P. and Luckmann T. (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality* Allen Lane

## 2. Societies as Organic Structures

(12 minutes)

### Before watching this section

- Ask students if there is any point in having to learn **theories from the 19th century** today, when society has changed so much?
- Ask students how they think **social order** exists in our society?
- In the video, Anthony Giddens says we are born as individuals in a society which precedes our existence. He refers to the legal system as an example of a social order which precedes us and continues after us. Can you give other examples of “**enduring systems of organisation**” which are larger than the individual and which shape the individual’s life?.
- Ask students to write down their views of the **purpose of education**. What do they get from the experience of schooling apart from curriculum knowledge?

### After watching this section

- What do sociologists mean by **social structure**?
- What are the key ideas of **Durkheimian** theory?
- Functionalists argue that all existing **social institutions** exist to serve some function in maintaining social order. How might the following examples contribute to maintaining **social order** in our society?  
e.g. lone parents, pop festivals, race riots.
- What societies other than Northern Ireland do not operate on a **consensus** basis? How do you explain these areas in functionalist terms?

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### References:

#### *On Societies as Organic Structures*

Durkheimian and structural functionalist theories are covered quite fully in most textbooks, but **students** may also find the following helpful:

Slattery M. (1992) *Key Ideas in Sociology* Nelson.

Contains excellent chapters on Durkheim's notion of solidarity and Parson's view of structure and function.

Banton M. (Nov 1987) *The Davis and Moore Theory of Inequality* *Social Studies Review* A clear analysis of a still influential structural functionalist theory.

General textbooks usually convey the impression that the organic model of society is a thing of the past but this is simply not the case. The organic analogy is to be found in a number of branches of sociology including socio-biology, urban ecological theory and in some aspects of realism.

For **teachers** wishing to update their knowledge of the organic model post-Parsons, a good account can be found in:

Layder D. (1994) *Understanding Social Theory* chapter 2, Sage

Whereas there are few self confessed functionalists, the idea of human societies as systems of competition and selection remains a powerful influence on contemporary social theory. See, for example:

Runciman W. (1990) *A Treatise on Sociological Theory* Vol 2, Cambridge

Turner J. (1995) *Macrodynamics: Towards a Theory on the Organisation of Human Populations* Rutgers University Press

### 3. Societies as Economic Structures

(12 minutes)

#### Before watching this section

- In the previous section, Margaret Archer says Parsons is criticised for “the **oversocialised** view of man, men and women”. What does she mean by this?
- In the video, Rosie Gosling says “education systems **sift and sort**”. Do students agree that this is what schools do?
- One of the students in the video says they consider the **education system** fair and equal. Another says that education has done nothing for him. What reasons could they have for holding these differing views?

#### After watching the section on Societies as Economic Structures:

- What are the key ideas of **Marx**'s theory of social structures?
- What explanations have sociologists given for the failure of Marx's predictions?
- What did the Frankfurt School mean by a **culture** industry? Do you find this idea convincing and why?
- Ask students to identify the **dominant values** in British society (e.g. the right to life, democratic principles, the right to privacy etc.)  
Compare how structural functionalism and marxism explain these values?
- Compare and contrast the **structural functionalist** and the **marxist** approaches to education. What do these approaches have in common?

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### References:

#### *On Societies as Economic Structures*

Marx and Marxisms are well covered in the major textbooks. For **teachers** wishing to update their knowledge of the development of Marxist ideas by later writers, we recommend the excellent summaries in:

Swingewood A. (1991) *A Short History of Sociological Thought* chapter 7, 2nd edition

Layder D. (1994) *Understanding Social Theory* chapter 3

A good account of the concept of hegemony is found in:

Bocock R. (1986) *Hegemony* Tavistock

#### *On Education*

Two articles in *Sociology Review* provide useful summaries of issues raised on education in this part of the video:

Chitty C. (1993) *The Education System Transformed* pp 13-16 *Sociology Review* Vol 2 No 3

This article looks at some of the effects of the previous Conservative government's reforms of education.

Reid I. (1996) *Education and Inequality* pp 2-6 *Sociology Review* Vol 6 No 2

A good summary of the key issues on the relationship between social background and educational achievement.

## 4. Societies as Social Action

(18 minutes)

This section is designed to support understanding of

- the concept of social action
- the key ideas of Mead and Symbolic Interactionist theory
- the application of Interactionist theory to experiences of education
- some of the similarities and differences between structure and action theories

Before watching this section

- Some social theorists view people's behaviour as shaped by **society**. Do you think this is valid? What objections do you think there are to this view?
- If structural theories are wrong and we are all free thinkers pursuing our own interests, how then is **social order** possible?
- Ask students to write down ten adjectives which they would use to describe themselves. Analyse these according to the type of description. To what extent are these descriptions determined by the view teachers have of them as students?

After watching this section

- How does **Mead's** view of society differ from that of Durkheim and Marx?
- What does symbolic interactionism mean by '**taking the role of the other**'? Can students give examples? How valid is this idea?
- Symbolic interactionists speak of '**symbols**' which have meaning in our lives. Take a number of different symbols e.g. a flower, a red light, a cup and ask students to discuss the different meanings of these in different situations.
- Ask students to relook at their views on **education**. Which theories could explain their ideas and why?

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### References:

#### *On Societies as Social Action*

**Students** may find the following useful in addition to textbook reading:

Slattery M. (1992) *Key Ideas in Sociology* chapter 29  
A good explanation of some of Mead's key ideas.

Burgess R. (1989) *Investigating Society* Longman  
A collection of articles by professional sociologists on doing sociological research. Chapters by Eileen Barker and Steve Taylor are on using interactionist theory to study religion and child abuse.

*Social Studies Review* (1987) has two good one page articles on Mead (Vol. 2 No 3 p22) and Goffman's *Asylums* (Vol. 2 No 5 p12)

**Teachers** wanting to go beyond basic textbook accounts of Interactionism will find excellent accounts in:

Swingewood A. (1991) *A Short History of Sociological Thought* chapter 9

Layder D. (1994) *Understanding Social Theory* chapter 4

### 5. Understanding and Answering Theory Questions

(14 minutes)

This section is designed to support understanding of

- the application of the case study of medicalisation to social theory
- the need to understand theory rather than learn it
- preparing for and answering theory questions

Before watching this section

- How do you think students prepare for **theory** questions?
- Ask students to write down some of the **reasons** why they think people go to the doctor in modern society
- Mrs Jones is depressed. She goes to her doctor for treatment. Can you think of any **sociological ideas** which may help us to understand this?

After watching this section

- What do sociologists mean by **medicalisation**? What areas of life can you think of that have been medicalised in the 20th century?
- Divide students into three groups, one to take the **structural functionalist**, the second the **marxist** and the third the **interactionist** approach. Choosing an area other than medicalisation (e.g. a creche, a hospice, a holiday camp) ask the groups to analyse the institution from their given perspective and present this to the class.
- Our examiner, Pauline Kendall says in the video that students are often frightened by theory, but that theory questions give students the opportunity to set their own agenda. How will this affect revision and theory preparation for the exam?
- The video says the fact that there are different theories in sociology is a strength and not a weakness. How true do you find this?

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### References:

#### **On Case Study: Medicalisation**

The classic statement of medicalisation is, of course, Ivan Illich's polemic against the 'medical establishment', which has recently been reprinted by Penguin.

Illich I. (1990) *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* Penguin

While most sociology textbooks now include a chapter on health and medicine, in our view, they tend not to be as good as most of the other chapters. **Teachers** and **students** may wish to use a specialist sociology of health text. See, for example:

Davey B. et al. eds (1995) *Health and Disease: A Reader* part 4, Open University

Taylor S. and Field D. eds (1997) *Sociology of Health and Health Care* chapter 3  
2nd edition, Blackwell

#### **On The Pharmaceutical Industry:**

Taylor I. (Jan 1991) *Big Crime: The International Drug Trade* pp 121-124 *Social Studies Review*

An interesting article on the thin line between business and crime in the pharmaceutical industry.

South N. (Feb 1996) *Policing Pharmaceuticals: Consumption, Regulation and Corporate Crime* pp 26-28 *Sociology Review* Vol 5 No 3

## Glossary

### Section 1: Introduction to Social Theory

**Model:** In everyday language, a model is simply something which represents something else. For example, many toys are models of things. In sociology, models are not things but theoretical ideas which provide ways of looking at the relationships between different parts of society. The aim is to simplify the complexities of the real world. For example, in his *theoretical model* of stratification, Marx depicted society as divided into two classes: owners and non-owners of the means of production but, in his *empirical research*, he recognised a variety of intermediate classes. However, his model provided a starting point for analysis.

**Abstract:** In general terms to abstract something means to take it away or separate it from something else. In academic terms, abstract ideas are ideas which have been separated from concrete circumstances. For example, the idea that human societies are social structures is an abstract idea. It does not apply to a particular society at a given time but, according to those who put forward this view, it is a general idea which can be applied to different societies at different times.

### Section 2: On Societies as Organic Structures

**Macro:** Macro simply means large. Taking a macro approach in sociology means trying to understand society in terms of large scale organisations and processes.

**Institution:** In human societies certain forms of conduct and beliefs, moral codes or religious practices, for example become reproduced by successive generations as accepted and proper ways of doing things. In sociological terms they become social institutions. Thus family, religion, education and government are examples of social institutions.

**Agent:** This is simply a sociological term for person or individual. However, the idea of *agency* has a rather more specific meaning in sociology. Agency refers to purposeful human action; that is, the choices that people make about their actions. There is a debate in sociology about the extent to which people are 'free agents' in social life. Some theoretical perspectives, interactionism and ethnomethodology for example, stress the importance of human agency. However, other theoretical approaches such as structural functionalism and marxism, suggest that agency has little significance in social life and that people's behaviour is largely determined by the influence of wider society.

**Process:** A problem for sociologists is that the things they are studying, human societies, are constantly changing. Therefore, sociologists try to develop ideas that help them to see societies, or social interaction, as series of unfolding changes and these are called social processes.

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**Collective Conscience:** An idea which was central to the sociology of Durkheim. He argued a conscience was not just something possessed by individuals. Human societies produced a collective spirit, or force, which was social in its nature but which influenced individuals and regulated how they thought and acted and, in this way, bound individuals to society. Durkheim felt that certain problems in modern societies, such as increasing suicide rates, were due to a weakening of the collective conscience.

**Organism:** This simply means a living thing. Some theoretical approaches in sociology, such as structural functionalism, liken human societies to an organism because they focus on how different parts work to maintain the whole. This is called the **organic analogy** in sociology.

**Functional Requirements:** These refer to things which have to be met if a society is to survive. For example, societies must ensure that people are fed, sheltered and the young are protected.

**Integration:** This describe the way in which people are tied, or bonded, to each other through the joint membership of social institutions such as the family, work and religious organisations.

**Socialisation:** This is a very general term used to describe the various social processes where people learn about the rules and values of a society or social group. Socialisation begins from the time people are born and continues throughout their lives. The pressure placed on people to conform to the values and practices of a social group is called **social control**. The family, religion and education, for example, are all social institutions which have fairly clearly defined social control functions.

**Meritocracy:** The idea of meritocracy argues that people's positions are, or should be, based on talent, achievement and qualifications rather than inherited privilege.

### Section 3: On Societies as Economic Structures

**Forces of Production:** This refers to the ways which goods and services are produced and includes things like the technology and materials used.

**Relations of Production:** This refers to the ways in which the forces of production are organised. For example, in Marxist theory which makes greatest use of this concept, the relations of production are seen in terms of owners and non-owners of the productive forces. Under this system the owners (ruling class) have legal control over both the process of production and the distribution of goods and services.

**Bourgeoisie:** This term is used loosely to describe the capitalist ruling class.

**Proletariat:** This term is used to describe the urban working class.

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**Culture/ Culture Industry:** In everyday language the word culture is often used to describe ‘high brow’ things like art or literature. In sociology, culture has a much wider meaning and refers to the ideas and values of a society or social group. There is a debate in sociology about the relationship between culture and other aspects of society. **Materialist** theories argue that culture is shaped largely by changes in the productive forces of a society. **Idealist** theories, in contrast, argue that culture can exert an independent influence on societies. **Culture industry** refers to organisations that produce ‘popular culture’ through newspapers, magazines, television, radio and video for example. While Marx himself and most marxist writers used an essentially materialist view of society, some later marxist theorists adopted a more idealist view. Adorno and Marcuse, for example, felt that the culture industry played an important and independent role in maintaining capitalism by helping to produce a largely passive, uncritical and consumer orientated population.

**Ideology:** An ideology loosely describes a set of ideas, opinions and beliefs that provide a particular way of looking at the world. It is a characteristic of ideologies that they tend to be intolerant and even hostile to criticism and alternative interpretations. Religious and political ideas are usually ideologies. Sociologists have been interested in the relationship between ideologies and the social contexts that produce them. However, sociological ideas themselves have sometimes degenerated into ideologies.

**Hegemony:** This word was originally used to refer to the domination of one state by another. Gramsci adapted this idea to explain the continuing dominance of the ruling class in capitalist society. He argued that the ruling class did not just control society through force but had actively to obtain the consent of the subordinate classes. In this context he was interested in the role of cultural institutions, such as family, education and media, in helping to obtain this consent.

### Section 4: Societies as Social Action

**Mediate:** To mediate is to provide a link between two things. Interactionists argue that language is more than just a means of communication, it is the cement of social order as it mediates the relationship between the individual and society. It enables people to interpret each other’s behaviour and act accordingly.

**Negotiated Character:** The idea of society as a negotiated order is a key theme of symbolic interactionist theory. Interactionists argue that social order does not arise more or less automatically, but is the product of negotiation; that is, how people work out a common definition of a situation. Thus, for interactionists, there is always a fluidity and uncertainty about social interaction. Critics of this position argue that people’s range of choices to negotiate their actions are severely limited by the ‘structural constraints’ of societies.

### Section 5: Social Theory Questions

**Medicalisation:** A term used by sociologists to describe a process where experiences which were once seen as a normal part of life, such as pregnancy, childbirth, unhappiness and ageing, are brought under the scrutiny and control of health professionals.

**Alienated:** Alienation means estrangement or separation. Some sociologists have used this concept to make critical observations on societies. Marx argued that the organisation of production for private profit meant that most workers were denied the opportunity to realise their creative capacities. They were then alienated from their true, or essential, selves. Later marxists from the Frankfurt School argued that as people were 'alienated' as producers, they sought to realise themselves as consumers, defining the meaning of their lives in terms of the possessions they had. From this perspective, the obsession of people in modern societies with consumer goods is a symptom of their alienation.

