

include institutions such as the family, religion, peer groups, the mass media, education and work, which are all interconnected, working for society as a whole.

Functionalists look at and explain society as a system. To understand how the system works they draw an **organic analogy** which describes these inter-linked institutions as working in much the same way as the organs of the body function together to keep the person alive and performing as a human being. So, functionalists are concerned with what they term the function of these institutions. They want to know what each contributes to society as a whole. The family, for example, has a socialisation function: it teaches children the norms and values of society. A function of religion is to integrate society, to bring people together and create unity. In addition, just as a human being has particular needs that must be met for survival, so too does society. Functionalists call these basic needs functional prerequisites.

Functionalists emphasise the sharing of culture by the majority of society's members. There is agreement over the norms and values which are seen to benefit everyone. The normal state of society is one of harmony because people have this common culture and act accordingly.

Evaluation

- ◆ Functionalists present an overly harmonious picture of society.
- ◆ Marxists regard functionalists as severely underestimating the degree of conflict in society.
- ◆ Social action theorists raise issues about individual action and choice. They view functionalism as too deterministic, seeing people as products of a system with little room for flexibility and negotiation.

Marxism

Activity 1.4

- 1 Research last year's annual profits of a major bank and a national supermarket.
- 2 Find out the average earnings of a bank clerk and a supermarket checkout operator.

Marxism takes its name from Karl Marx, who died in 1883. For many Marxists, the starting point for understanding how society works is economic production. Production is fundamental to all societies in order for them to survive; people need food and they need material objects. For production to take place, there has to be technology, raw materials and knowledge. These aspects of production are called the means of production.

However, production also involves social relationships such as those between employer and employee. It is these that shape everything else in society. For Marxists, a person's class is determined by their relationship to the means of production. Owning them puts a person in the ruling class, which comprises the smallest class and is powerful as well as wealthy. The rest of society's members make up the subject class. These are the workers, who have to sell their labour in exchange for a wage.

Marxists regard the relationship between bosses and workers as exploitative. This is not because all bosses are inherently awful people. Rather, it is because in a capitalist society the ultimate goal is to make a profit. Workers represent a large cost for an employer. Hence the boss tries to pay the workers as little as possible while getting the maximum labour out of them. Conflict for Marxists then is inevitable. The experience of work for many workers is of **alienation**. People feel removed from the process of production. Work is meaningless, giving no satisfaction or fulfilment. The workers are not aware of the exploitative nature of their work, though, because it is presented as fair by the ruling class. They spread **ideology** to justify their position. An ideology is a partial picture of society, a way of seeing that is presented as normal, as the only way for things to be.

More recent Marxists put more stress upon cultural and ideological factors, as opposed to the economic one, in affecting how society shapes people.

Evaluation

- ◆ Marx has been criticised for the priority he gives to economic factors.
- ◆ Marx underestimated the growth of the middle classes.
- ◆ Marxism has been described as a one-dimensional theory.

Feminism

Activity 1.5

- 1 Working in small groups, complete the following sentence:
A feminist is
- 2 Compare your sentence with other groups in your class.
- 3 Are the class findings mainly positive or negative things?
- 4 Are you a feminist? Justify your response.

There are different types of feminisms, but, in general, feminists believe that women should have equality with men. They see important aspects of society as **patriarchal** – male dominated. Feminists are critical of the power that men hold in society. For example, parliament has historically been dominated by men and is the place where decisions are made about how things should be throughout the country. In the workplace, men have held more powerful positions and have, on average, been better paid. In some families women have experienced violence.

Feminists have fought to change things for women. They see different ways of doing this. For example, some feminists campaign for changes in the law and new social policies. Some things, such as having the same voting rights, might be taken for granted today, but the suffragettes campaigned for women to have the right to vote a century ago. Feminists also sought to change the way that boys and girls are socialised according to their gender. If expectations in terms of what males and females think is appropriate for them to do change, then that can also be a way forward towards equality. Other feminists adopt a more radical approach in order to overturn the patriarchal structures that disadvantage women. Some recent feminists have highlighted the differences between women, questioning the usefulness of categorising the position of, for example, middle- and working-class women in the same vein.

Evaluation

- ◆ There have been legal changes that have benefited women.

- ◆ There are many differences within the categories of 'men' and 'women'.

All of the above theories stress the way in which the individual is constrained by society. Functionalists show how common culture affects our behaviour. For Marxists, the emphasis is capitalism, whereas for feminists, society is patriarchal. The next theory, however, takes a different starting point, with a shift from structure to individual action.

Social action theory

Activity 1.6

Consider the following situation. What is happening?



Figure 1.2

In contrast to the theories discussed above, social action theory looks at small-scale interaction. It considers action in terms of what it means for the individual. It also stresses that there are different ways of interpreting things, each of which is valid to the individual concerned. In Activity 1.6 the person could be in tears because:

- ◆ they are upset about something
- ◆ there is something in their eye
- ◆ they are crying tears of joy
- ◆ they have laughed really hard
- ◆ they have been peeling onions.

Social action theory sees action as meaningful to the people involved. For example, a person may leave a highly-paid occupation for a lower-paid job which some people may regard in a negative light. However, it could mean something positive for the individual concerned as they want to

make a change in career and the lower-paid job represents a move in the right direction. Therefore, what is important is the interpretation for the individual. From this perspective, meanings are not fixed. They are negotiated and change.

Social action theorists focus on the definition of the situation. They examine how things come to be defined and interpreted in the way they are. For example, if a person interprets a situation they are involved in as threatening, it is their definition of that situation that is important, that is, the meaning that they attach to the event. The theorists point out, though, that should a similar situation arise, the interpretation may change, depending upon the negotiations that take place on that occasion. Social action theorists are interested in the way that some groups are labelled and the impact that label has on the individual. For example, in school, a person could be labelled as 'bright'. The individual labelled in that way could then actually become more successful because of a belief that the label was right. This is known as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It means that the expectations according to the label are fulfilled. It does not always work in a positive way for the individual though. For example, if someone commits an illegal activity, such as theft, and is caught then the label 'thief' can become fundamental to how that person sees himself or herself. 'Thief' becomes what is seen as their 'master status'.

Evaluation

- ◆ Social action theories are criticised for ignoring the historical and social settings in which interaction takes place.
- ◆ Not everybody's interpretations are given the same validity. Social action theories do not consider power and its impact.
- ◆ With regard to labelling, critics argue that not everyone goes along with the label. Some people may resist.

Postmodernism

Activity 1.7

What three choices are available to you that your grandparents did not have? (Examples of things you may consider are: relationships, education, travel, consumer goods, food.)

In contrast to the theories examined so far, postmodernists do not believe it is possible to have one general overriding theory about how things are in society. They focus, in particular, on the impact of the media-saturated society of today in which it is difficult to separate media images from so-called reality. We buy magazines about soap stars and have a sophisticated understanding of media messages, so this becomes a **hyper-reality**.

Some postmodernists maintain that people are no longer restricted by their class position, their gender, or their ethnicity. Instead, people can make choices about how to live and what identity to adopt. There is incessant choice available. People can construct their own identity through what they consume.

Evaluation

People do not make choices in a vacuum. If someone likes the idea of a particular identity, but does not have the means to achieve it, then their identity is not expressed as they wish. They could be restricted by class, if their family do not earn high salaries; or a girl desiring the identity of a celebrity babe may be restricted by her father who will not let her have the body piercing and tattoos she dreams of.

Activity 1.8

Return to the statements in Activity 1.1. In pairs, identify which theory each statement fits with.

Activity 1.1

- 1 Select two of the following statements which you agree with. Give an example to support each of your chosen statements.
 - Anyone in society can be successful. It's up to them.
 - Men get the best deal in this world.
 - People can choose their own identity and lifestyle.
 - Workers are exploited at work and don't get paid a fair wage.
 - There are lots of differences between members of social groups such as class, ethnic or gender groups.
 - Members of society hold shared values that hold society together.
 - Opportunities are affected by social class.
 - Powerful groups in society justify their position by spreading their ideas.
- 2 Discuss these with the rest of your class.

Sociological theory

A sociological theory is a way of seeing something, taking a perspective on it and understanding it from a particular point of view. The theories may be referring to the same thing, but see and understand it differently.

Activity 1.2

People can have very different opinions on films. For example, one person may complain about the sexist representation of women in a particular film which another person did not see at all. Another may think a film politically biased, whereas someone else may see it as neutral.

Think of a film you've seen and discuss this with other members of your class who have also seen it. Identify two different things about the film that people have picked up on.

Activity 1.3

Identify and briefly explain two values people share in the contemporary UK

Functionalists maintain that society has a **common culture** comprising shared norms and values. There is **value consensus**, that is agreement over, and a shared belief in, the same values. We learn this culture through the process of socialisation. The agents of socialisation

People can have an identical experience but interpret things differently. In sociology, theories differ in terms of how they regard society. Different theories have different starting points.

- ◆ Some theories begin with society as a whole. They look at the institutions within it, such as the family, education and religion, for example, and then work inwards to the individual and how he or she is affected by the system.
- ◆ However, others start with the individual and work outwards to look at how they create meanings and negotiate roles within a system.

Macro versus micro

Broadly speaking, there are sociologists who see society as a whole, taking a macro perspective, and those who take the individual and their actions as a starting point, taking a micro perspective. Those who use a macro approach have different ideas about the way society is structured and the impact those structures have upon individuals. However, they are all macro approaches because they look at society as a whole, recognise a social system and see external structures that shape the individual.

The macro theories

The macro theorists include:

- ◆ functionalists
- ◆ Marxists
- ◆ feminists.

Functionalism