

Action Theories

Unlike structural theories which start with society and look at how it affects the individual, action theories start with the individual. We have free will and free choices and are not manipulated like puppets. Meanings and actions are central to this approach. Action theories form a major part of the interpretive approach in sociology



Max Weber 1864-1920

One of the founding fathers, Weber is a little chameleon like in his theoretical approach. Some of his work veers towards the structural, but his work really set the ground for the development of the action approaches.

He did appreciate that structural factors can shape our behaviour, but individuals do attach meaning to their actions.

Weber saw 4 crucial types of action

1. Rational (instrumental) - i.e. logical. An actor works out the best way of achieving a goal with a measured step by step approach.
2. Traditional – customary behaviour - we do it because we've always done it! This is habitual and needs little conscious thought
3. Affectual – This is emotion led action e.g. crying, laughing etc in response to events
4. Value-rational – relates to actions towards a goal that the actor sees as desirable for its own sake e.g. a religious ritual like praying – to some this is not logical

For Weber sociologists should observe individuals or small groups, using the concept of **verstehen** - trying to see things through the eyes of the person/s under study (empathetic understanding).

Criticisms

- Verstehen is not truly achievable because we cannot actually put ourselves in the position of others and actually see things 'through their eyes'.
- His typology of action is confusing – some aspects overlap
- Some criticise his emphasis on the individual at the expense of shared meaning

Symbolic Interactionism

Literally the interaction via the use of symbols – this model developed in the first half of the 20th Century in the USA and looks at the meanings we attach to these 'symbols' – the most used one being language.

G H Mead 1863-1931

Mead argued that humans interact through the use of symbols such as

- Symbols can be:
- Visual signs (red traffic light = stop)
- Visual gestures (waving = hello)
- Expressions (frown = angry)
- Verbal (scream = fear)
- Sounds (siren = emergency)

Shared understanding of these symbols and how to respond to them form the basis of communication.

Whilst we are each conscious individuals, the way in which we choose to behave is influenced by the social context of that behaviour.

H Blumer 1900-87

Blumer developed Mead's concepts of the Me and the I. There are 2 aspects of the self, which can influence behaviour:

1. The "I" aspect which largely consists of spontaneous actions.
2. The "Me" aspect which consists of an awareness of how other people expect us to behave at any given moment.

Unlike in animals where the "I" is dominant, for humans the "Me" is dominant which in effect means that most human behaviour is socially constructed.

Labelling Theory

Perhaps the most well known application of symbolic interactionism is labelling theory. Developed initially by H Becker it has been used widely in Education and Deviance.

- We all label people and objects
- Those with power are able to label someone, and make others accept that label
- Labelling of humans can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy
- If the label is especially damaging, it can become a **master status**

E Goffman

Goffman uses a dramaturgical model and develops Mead's work on the Me/I.

- He argues that life is like a play – we take on a character for ourselves in each social situation.
- Our role is to carry out a convincing performance on the stage that is our life.

2 concepts are important

1. Presentation of the self – we control how we put ourselves across to others.
2. Impression management – we see how the audience is responding and adjust our behaviour accordingly

- Goffman even suggests that we do not have a real sense of self – we do not know our true personality so therefore it may not exist

Evaluation Of Symbolic Interactionism

- It over-emphasises the significance of the individual. There tends to be little conception of social structures.
- It cannot explain **power** relationships in society in the way that Marxists or feminists have. It does not explain why some individuals / social groups are more powerful than others.
- It concentrates too much on small-scale, trivial aspects of social life, therefore ignoring the much bigger picture of life at a society-wide level of analysis.
- It believes that nearly everything is socially constructed - so logically one could argue that sociology is itself a social construct, and therefore useless?
- It fails to explain **social order** and **social change**.
- The dramaturgical analogy is weak because at times we are actors and audience members.
- Ethnomethodologists believe it fails to explain how actors create meanings

Action Theories 2

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Phenomenology

Phenomenon is the term used to describe 'things' as they appear to our senses. Husserl (1859-1939) argued that the world only makes sense because we impose meaning on it. The world and the things in it are products of our mind.

Shultz (1899-1959)

Humans make sense of the world by categorizing it. These categorizations are shared – what he calls **typifications**. We need to have these shared typifications to prevent confusion as the meaning given to acts can vary from situation to situation. E.g. putting your hand up in class means something different from putting it up at an auction.

Typifications are learned and passed on through language, and are referred to as 'common sense'. We build up a stock of shared typifications and gain what Shulz calls 'recipe knowledge'

Criticisms

- Schutz based his ideas on speculation – he did not actually do any research.
- Structuralists would say that social facts DO exist. external to individuals and act on them
- If there is no social reality then studying Sociology is pointless.
- The fact that we do share typifications suggests that there IS a social reality with social order.

Ethnomethodology

- First developed in 1960s, mainly from the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Unlike structuralism, Garfinkel sees order being created from the bottom up. As individuals we construct order from common sense knowledge.
- Garfinkel coined the term 'ethnomethodology', to mean 'the study of the methods used by people to make sense of social life'. This is where ethnomethodology differs from symbolic interactionism. SI is interested in the effects of attaching meanings to things, EM is interested in how we produce these meanings in the first place.
- Meanings are not always clear – what Garfinkel calls indexicality. The notion of 'social order' is a myth. Humans pretend there is an order and meaning to life because we can't cope with uncertainty.
- Humans use the '**documentary method**' to convince themselves that social order exists. This involves finding a pattern in a situation and using it to help in future situations. Garfinkel got students to pretend to be strangers in their own home – and caused bewilderment and anxiety amongst parents. I.e. the pattern was disrupted.
- This documentary method – seeking patterns to help find order – is used by coroners to aid with suicide verdicts according to Garfinkel. Coroners go through a check list - like Atkinson found. Those deaths which tick more things on the list are more likely to be seen as suicide. E.g., mode of death, notes left, recent life events, mental illness history etc.

Criticisms

- Some see EM as trivial – stating the obvious
- Social class, age, ethnicity and gender can have real, powerful affects on people's lives. It is naive to assume these things are meaningless.
- EM says that we all create order by identifying patterns – and some are fictions. If this is the case then the same could be said about EM itself.
- Structuralists would argue that norms, values etc are social facts not fictions and do exert significant influences on individuals

Structuration - Giddens

Exploring the idea that structural and social action perspectives should be combined!

Do we have to have this structural versus interpretive/action divide in the subject? Does it have to be one or the other? Some sociologists believe that we can have the best of both worlds and combine the 2 approaches.

Giddens is one of these to follow Weber's lead and combines the 2 approaches in Structuration.

- Social structures can influence our actions
- Our actions can influence social structures
- In other words, sometimes society controls us, but sometimes we control society
- Giddens sees 2 forms of structures in society, which can influence human behaviour
 1. Rules – laws and unwritten guidelines, norms values etc.
 2. Resources - These can be 'things' such as the economic - materials, land, technology, goods (**allocative** resources)
Or having power over others (**authoritative** resources)

Individuals have the power to change and affect these structures. But often we reproduce them via socialisation and routine (things become traditional). We like order and stability.

But individuals can make changes – we continually **reflect** on our lives and make decisions about our actions. In the 21st C this is important as traditions exert less and less influence and the pace of change (e.g. new technology) is greater than ever before.

And sometimes our actions (Giddens calls them 'agency') have unintended consequences – e.g. The Calvinists adoption of a protestant work ethic caused capitalism to develop according to Weber – but this was an unintended bi-product. Glorifying God was their motivation.

Evaluation Of Structuration

- Is Giddens just restating Weber's theoretical approach?
- Giddens does not give enough examples to show how structure and agency are linked
- Mary Archer (1995) believes he has underestimated the power of structures to resist change.
- Craib believes that his approach is really another action theory reducing the structure bit to small scale every day actions and fails to explain what happens to large scale structures like the state and economy