

## **Sociology A: Evaluate action perspectives in sociology Outcome 2**

### **Gregor Leishman: Class 1x**

Social action theory regards the most important influence on an individual's behaviour as being the behaviour of other individuals towards that person. This means that the focus is on the way individual pieces of social interaction that takes place between individuals and how it is understood by these individuals. Rather than looking at cultural rules and inequality between social groups. Action theory also looks at how individuals decide what roles to play and in what social settings. Action theorists argue that the essence of social life comes from the ability of humans to work out what is going on around them and their ability to choose to act in a particular way after interpreting the situation. Also, action theorists argue that it is the individuals who shape society and not society that shapes the individual. Plus nearly all human action comes from doing what they want to do in order to achieve a chosen purpose. Action theory emphasises that humans decide what to do in the light of their interpretation of the world around them, meaning that choices are made by that person's definition of a situation. This shows that action theory deals with individual's subjective states.

One of the key theorists involved in action theory was Max Weber. Weber argued that sociological explanations of action should begin with observing and interpreting the subjective state of mind of people. Weber saw people as actors who carry out actions to achieve goals. The choices of goals and the means of achieving them are influenced by the actor's perception of the social situation rather than the objective nature of a situation. Weber also argued that if a person carries out an action which does not take account of the actions of others then it is not a social action, or if an action is carried out in private or with no other person present. For example, an accidental car crash or a person praying alone in their bedroom. Weber suggested that to explain social action, firstly it was necessary to understand the meaning attached to it by the person. From this Weber argued that there are two types of understanding. The first is *aktuelles verstehen*. This is roughly translated as direct observational understanding. For example, it is possible to understand if someone is upset by observing their facial expression and body language. Also it is possible to understand what is happening when a person's foot hits a football, he is playing football. But this for Weber was not a sufficient level of understanding to begin to explain social action. This is where *erklarendes verstehen* comes in. This roughly means, exploratory

understanding. With this form of understanding Weber believed that sociologists must try to understand the action in terms of the motives that creates the action. For example, this type of understanding would require an understanding of why the person was kicking a football. Was it to earn a wage, to keep fit or to express emotion. Weber argued that to achieve this form of understanding it was necessary for a person to imagine themselves in the other person's shoes or situation, to try and understand the motives behind the action.

One person who sociologists saw as showing significant insights into sociology was a philosopher and psychologist, George Herbert Mead. It was his insights into the social nature of human beings that was significant. This insight was led to symbolic interactionism. Mead started with making a clear distinction between human beings and animals. This is because Mead thought that human beings have the ability to symbolise. This was meant as the ability to make one thing represent another, for example, if a person said they had travelled to college by bus, then any person hearing this would have an idea of what the object/bus looked like. This means that a person does not need to have a bus in front of them to understand what a bus looks like. From this Mead believed that language is a symbolic system and that it is a person's ability to use language that makes people different from animals. This then allows people to engage in unique social behaviour. Also it is important that the symbolic system is shared by all who are using it. For example, the word bus only has meaning in the English language, so in another language it is important to learn the word to symbolise the object. Through this, Mead argued it enables a person to explain their thoughts to another person, but this done through interpretation.

Interpretation is used to gain an understanding of the actions and meanings of these actions of a person. Also when people interact with each other, they want others to arrive at a certain interpretation of their actions and they want people to think one thing about them rather than another. For example, stopping a shop assistant and talking to them does not mean a person wants to be friends with the shop assistant, it simply means that the person is looking for information or a product. Through the process of interpretation it is also thought that during this process it is possible to reinterpret the meaning of something. This is because meanings are created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interpretation. Also the initial interpretation of something may give the wrong or incorrect meaning. This is why it is important to understand the meaning held by the other person. For example, a person is starting a new job and their new boss acts in a way that is interpreted

by the person as being unfriendly. There could be many reasons why the person's boss is behaving in this manner, it could be they had a bad weekend, a relative or friend is ill, the stress of their job, or any other number of reasons. Only once the person starting the new job has an understanding of what is going on with their new boss, then they can gain the correct meaning behind their boss's actions.

The way people dress is another form of gestures that people interpret as having a meaning. For example, Police officers, Ambulance persons and Fire Brigade persons. These people may not communicate directly with people but with their use of symbolic dress wear, they are communicating to others what they want them to interpret. Not only through symbolic dress wear but through other forms of communication like language and gestures, people can get a form of understanding about others, but this can also lead to labelling. Labelling can happen when a person dresses, acts (through gestures and body language) and their use of language, which is then interpreted in a certain way and the person who has interpreted this puts the person into a certain category. For example, a male aged twenty one, wearing football colours and behaving in a loud manner, may be interpreted as being a football hooligan. This is not to say it is not the case, but in communicating in this way that person may be subjected to labelling. Whether the person is a football hooligan or not, there is the possibility that the person may act like one through self concept. This is argued by the interactionists, that an individual develops a self concept or a picture of themselves, which has an important influence on their actions. The self concept is developed from the interaction process because it is a reflection of the reactions of others towards the person. People tend to act in ways that others interpret them to be. For example, if others see a person as being aggressive and violent, then that person will have a tendency to act this way.

They also argue that roles are an important part of human interaction. They argue that roles are quite often unclear and vague. This means that a person's role is often open to negotiation and improvisation. It is thought that these roles are just general guidelines for action. What the interactionists think is important is how a person's role is employed in situations. For example, when an individual starts teaching for the first time, the person has a vague understanding about the role of a teacher. Their interactions and definition of what a teacher should be will be negotiated and continually renegotiated through time rather than being fixed. This, like meanings are negotiated in the interaction process.

Social action theory can be seen to have a strength in the fact that it emphasises the role of the human agency and that it is good at explaining small scale interactions. Also social action theory gives an important explanation of the meaning attached to social behaviour and the interpretations of social behaviour by others. But social action theory tends to only analyse individuals or small groups and does not look at the bigger picture, plus it can be seen to be subjective, which can lead to a vague generalisation about society.

Social stratification shows that in many societies, class and status are closely linked. Sociologists like Marx and Weber have argued about the best way to define social classes. Many have thought that the class categories are at least based upon occupational groupings. Official socio-economic groups, which, it is claimed, bring together people with jobs of similar social economic status and can, show social inequality. This is shown through table 2.1 page 39, Occupational class and industrial status of the gainfully occupied population in Great Britain 1911, 1921, 1931, 1951, 1971, from Haralambos and Holborn Sociology, Themes and Perspectives, Fifth edition. Also the table 2.8 page 48, the distribution of wealth, 1976 to 1994, from Haralambos and Holborn Sociology, Themes and Perspectives, Fifth edition, shows that the total of the wealthy population is remaining almost constant through the last thirty years, and to a point is showing an actual rise towards 1994.

Anthony Giddens attempted to overcome the division between structure and action. The basic point Giddens argues is that structural and action are two sides of the same coin. Neither structure nor action can exist without each other. This Giddens argued was caused through social actions producing structures and through this process reproduction them. Giddens used a single word "Structuration", to describe the way structures relate to social actions. This Giddens called the "duality of structures", which Giddens suggested that both structures make social action possible and visa versa. This Giddens claimed was shown through the words of, " it is you, I and every individual, that create structure".