This is more of a problem in overt observation. However interpretivists argue that over time the group generally gets used to the observer’s presence.

Structure vs action perspectives
- PP observation is normally associated with ‘action’ perspectives, especially interactionism. This is because they see society as constructed from the ‘bottom up’ through small scale face to face interactions of individual actors and their meanings.
- PP observation is a valuable tool for examining these micro-level interactions and meanings at first hand as it allows us to see them through the actor’s eyes.

Documents:

Sociologists use the following documents:
- Public documents: produced by organisations such as govt. departments, schools, welfare agencies, businesses and charities. They include ofsted reports, media output, records of parliamentary debates etc
- Personal documents: include items such as Facebook pages, letters, diaries, photo albums and autobiographies. They are first person accounts of social events and personal experiences often including feelings and attitudes.
- Historical documents: simply personal or public documents created in the past

Practical strengths/issues and documents:
Strengths:
- They may be the only available source of info for studying the past
- They are a free or cheap source of large amounts of data because someone else has already gathered the info- saves the sociologist time
Issues:
- It is not always possible to gain access to them
- Individuals and organisations create documents for their own purposes, not the sociologists- therefore they may not contain answers that the sociologist needs

Theoretical issues and documents:
- Interpretivists favour the use of documents, positivists reject them as they see them as an unreliable and unrepresentative source.

Validity
- Interpretivists’ preference for documents comes from the fact that they believe they give the researcher a valid picture of actors’ meanings.
- The rich qualitative data of diaries and letters gives us an insight into the writer’s worldview and meanings by enabling us to get close to their reality.
- However the data may not be authentic, it may not be credible, there is also a danger of misinterpreting what the document means.

Reliability
- Positivists regard documents as unreliable sources of data

Representativeness
- Some groups may not be represented in documents- the illiterate and those with limited leisure time are unlikely to keep diaries.
- If we cannot be sure the data from the docs is representative, we cannot safely generalise from it.
This is similar to Gramsci’s distinction between coercion and consent as different ways of securing the dominance of the bourgeoisie.

Althusser’s criticisms of humanism
- For structuralist Marxists, our sense of free will, choice and creativity is an illusion. The truth is that everything about us is the product of underlying social structures.
- Althusser is therefore dismissive of humanism, including humanistic Marxists such as Gramsci. Humanists believe that people can use their creativity, reason and free will to change society.
- He argues that we are not free agents that humanists think we are- in reality we are merely products of social structures that determine everything about us, preparing us to fit into pre-existing positions in the structure of capitalism.
- Therefore in Althusser’s view, socialism will not come about because of a change in consciousness, but because of a crisis of capitalism resulting from over-determination.

Evaluation fo Althusser
- Althusser claims to oppose both humanism and determinism, but he is harsher on humanism. Although he rejects economic determinism, he replaces it with a more complex ‘structural determinism’ where everything is determined by the 3 structures
- For humanistic Marxists such as Gouldner, this ‘scientific’ approach discourages political activism
- E.P Thompson criticises Althusser for being ‘elitist’- the belief that the communist party knows what is best for the workers who should therefore blindly follow them.

7. Feminist Theories

Liberal or reformist feminism:
- Liberals are concerned with the human and civil rights and freedoms of the individual. They believe all humans should have equal rights.
- Reformism is the idea that progress towards equal rights can be achieved by gradual reforms or piecemeal changes in society without need for revolution.

Laws and policies—> liberal feminists (often called reformists) believe women can achieve gender equality in this way.
- E.g. they argue that laws and policies against sex discrimination in employment and education can secure equal opportunities for women

Cultural change—> liberal feminists call for cultural change. In their view, traditional prejudices and stereotypes about gender differences are a barrier to equality.
- E.g. beliefs that woman are less rational and more dominated by emotion and instinct are used to legitimate their exclusion from decision-making roles and their confinement to childrearing and housework.
- Liberal feminists reject the idea that biological differences make women less competent or rational than men, or that men are biologically less emotional.

Sex and gender
- Like Oakley, liberal feminists distinguish between sex and gender:
  - Sex- refers to biologically differences between males and females, such as their reproductive role, hormonal and physical differences.
• Gender refers to culturally constructed differences between the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles and identities assigned to males and females. It includes the ideas that cultures hold about the abilities of males and females.
-While sex differences are seen as fixed, gender differences vary between cultures and over time.

For liberal feminists, sexist attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about gender are culturally constructed and transmitted through socialisation.
-Therefore to achieve gender equality we must change society’s socialisation patterns- hence liberal feminists seek to promote appropriate role models in education and the family.

Liberal feminism is an optimistic theory- they believe that:
- Changes in socialisation and culture are gradually leading to more rational attitudes to gender and overcoming ignorance and prejudice.
- Political action to introduce anti-discriminatory laws and policies is steadily bringing about progress to a fairer society where gender is not important.

Liberal feminism can be seen as a critique of the functionalist view of gender roles. Functionalists such as Parsons distinguish between instrumental and expressive:
- Instrumental roles: performed in the public sphere of paid work, politics, and decision-making. The sphere involves rationality, detachment and objectivity.
- Expressive roles: performed in the private sphere of unpaid domestic labour, childrearing and caring for family members. This sphere involves emotion, attachment and subjectivity.

In Parsons’ view, instrumental roles are the domain of men while expressive roles are the domain of women- liberal feminism challenges this division.
-They argue that men and women are equally capable of performing roles in both spheres- they aim to break down the barrier between the two spheres.

Despite its critique of the functionalist view of gender divisions, liberal feminism is the feminist theory closest to a consensus view of society.

Evaluation of liberal feminism
-Studies conducted by liberal feminists have produced evidence documenting the extent of gender inequality and discrimination, and legitimising the demand for reform in areas such as equal pay and employment etc
-They are criticised for over-optimism- they see the obstacles of emancipation as simply the prejudices of individuals or irrational laws that can be gradually reformed.
-They ignore the possibility that there are deep-seated structures causing women’s oppression such as capitalism or patriarchy.
-Marxist feminists and radical feminists argue that liberal feminism fails to recognise the underlying causes of women’s subordination and that it is naive to believe that changes in the law or attitudes will be enough to bring equality.
-Instead they believe that far-reaching, revolutionary changes are needed.

Radical feminism

Radical feminism emerged in the early 1970s- they claim that:
- Patriarchy is universal: male domination of women exists in all known societies.
  According to SHULAMITH FIRESTONE, the origins of patriarchy lie in women’s
Difference feminism argues that feminist theory has claimed a ‘false universality’ for itself - claims to be all about women but in reality was only about the experiences of white, Western, heterosexual, middle class women.

-This criticism raises 2 important issues- the problem of essentialism and the relationship of feminism to the Enlightenment project.

The problem of essentialism

- Essentialism is the idea that all women share the same fundamental ‘essence’ - they are all essentially the same and all share the same experiences of oppression.

Difference feminists argue that liberal, marxist and radical feminists are essentialist - they all see women as the same so they fail to reflect the diversity of women’s experiences and they exclude other women and their problems.

Poststructuralist feminism

- E.g. JUDITH BUTLER offer this alternative approach concerned with discourses and power/knowledge. Discourses are ways of seeing, thinking or speaking.

The Enlightenment project

- Poststructuralists argue the Enlightenment project is a form of power/knowledge.
- Butler argues that the enlightenment ideals were simply a form of power/knowledge that legitimated domination by western, white, middle-class males.
- She also argues that white, western, middle-class women who dominate the feminist movement have falsely claimed to represent ‘universal womanhood’.
- She concludes that feminists are wrong to believe they can develop an Enlightenment project so that it includes all women as women are not a single entity who share the same ‘essence’.
- For poststructuralism, there is no fixed ‘essence’ of what it is to be a woman because our identities are constructed through discourses and because there are many different discourses in different times and cultures, there can be no fixed entity called ‘womanhood’ that is the same everywhere.
- Butler argues that poststructuralism offers advantages for feminism- it enables feminists to ‘de-construct’ different discourses to reveal how they subordinate women- the medicalisation of childbirth etc
- Different discourses give rise to different forms of oppression and thus to different identities and experiences for women.

In Butler’s view therefore, by rejecting essentialism and by stressing the diversity of discourses, post structuralism recognises and legitimates the diversity of women’s lives and struggles, rather than prioritising some and excluding others.

Evaluation of poststructuralist feminism

- While poststructuralist feminism seems to offer a theoretical basis for recognising the diversity of women’s experiences and struggles, critics argue it is weak.
- Walby agrees that there are differences among women, but she argues that there are also important similarities- they are all faced with patriarchy.
- Celebrating difference may have the effect of dividing women into an infinite number of sub-groups, thereby weakening feminism as a movement for change.
- SEGAL criticises poststructuralist feminism for abandoning notions of real, objective social structures. Oppression is not just the result of discourses- it is about real inequality.
- However there is a paradox- indexicality suggests that we cannot take any meaning for granted as fixed or clear, yet in everyday life this is what we do. Garfinkel says that what enables us to behave as if meanings are clear is reflexivity- the fact that we use common sense knowledge in everyday interactions to construct a sense of meaning and order and stop indexicality from occurring. Language is of vital importance in achieving reflexivity- for EM our description of something gives it reality.

Experiments in disrupting social order
Garfinkel and his students sought to demonstrate the nature of social order by a series of ‘breaching experiments’- the aim was to disrupt people’s sense of order and challenge their reflexivity by undermining their assumptions about the situation. He concluded that by challenging people’s taken-for-granted assumptions, the experiments show how the orderliness of everyday situations is not inevitable but is actually an accomplishment of those who take part in them.

Suicide and reflexivity
Garfinkel is interested in the methods we use to achieve reflexivity- to make sense of the world as orderly. Coroners make sense of deaths by selecting particular features from the infinite number of possible ‘facts’ about the dead. For Garfinkel, humans constantly strive to impose order by seeking patterns, even though these patterns are really just social constructs.

Garfinkel is critical of conventional sociology- he accuses it of just using the same methods as ordinary members of society to create order and meaning.

Evaluation of ethnomethodology
- EM draws attention to how we actively construct order and meaning.
- However, Craib argues that its findings are trivial- they spend a lot of time ‘uncovering’ taken for granted rules that are not surprising.
- EM denies the existence of wider society, seeing it as merely a shared fiction. Yet by analysing how members apply general rules or norms to specific contexts, it assumes that a structure of norms exists beyond these contexts.
- EM ignores how wider structures of power and inequality affect the meanings that individuals construct.

Structure and action
Structural theories such as functionalism and Marxism tend to be deterministic, seeing society as something objective, existing outside individuals and constraining them. Whereas action theories tend to be voluntaristic, seeing society as the creation of its members through their subjective actions and meanings.

Giddens’ structuration theory
- According to Giddens there is a duality of structure- neither structure or action can exist without the other.
- Through our actions we produce and reproduce structures over time and space, while these structures are what make our actions possible in the first place. **Giddens** calls this relationship ‘structuration’.

- He illustrates this with language - a language is a structure (made up of a set of rules of grammar that govern how we use it to express meanings). It exists independently of any individual and it constrains our behaviour.

- If we wish to use language to communicate we must obey its rules otherwise we will not be understood - this shows how our action depends on existence of structure.

- But structure also depends on action - language would not exist if no one used it. It is produced and reproduced over time through the actions of individuals speaking and writing it. These actions can also change the structure.

Reproduction of structures through agency
- For **Giddens**, structure has 2 elements:
  - Rules - the norms, customs and laws that govern action
  - Resources - both economic (raw materials, technology etc) and power over others
- Rules and resources can be either reproduced or changed through human action

However, in **Giddens’** view, although our action can change existing structures, it generally tends to reproduce them. He identifies 2 reasons for this:
- First, society’s rules contain a stock of knowledge about how to live our lives. Similarly we use resources in the form of money. Thus as we go about our routine activities, we tend to reproduce the existing structure of society.
- Second, we reproduce existing structures through our action because we have a deep-seated need for ontological security - a need to feel that the world is stable and predictable. This need tends to encourage action that maintains existing structures, rather than changing them.

Change of structures through agency
- Despite this tendency to maintain the structure of society, action or agency can also change it in 2 ways:
  - First, we ‘reflexively monitor’ our own action, constantly reflecting on our actions and their results, and we can deliberately choose a new course of action.
  - This is more likely in late modern society where tradition no longer dictates action, thus increasing the likelihood and pace of change.
  - Second, our actions may change the world, but not always as we intended. They may have unintended consequences.

Evaluation of Giddens
- Although he makes an important attempt to overcome the division between structure and action in sociological theory, his approach has been criticised.
- **Giddens** implies that actors can change structures simply by deciding to do so.
- **Archer** argues that he underestimates the capacity of structures to resist change.
- According to **Craib**, structuration theory isn't really a theory because it doesn't explain what actually happens in society. Instead it just describes the kinds of things we find when we study society such as actions, rules, resources etc…
- **Craib** argues that **Giddens** fails to unite structure and action - he regards **Giddens’** work as ‘a thoroughgoing action theory’ that reduces the idea of structure to the rules governing routine everyday actions.
- **Giddens** fails to explain how his theory applies to large-scale structures such as the economy and the state.
• The claim that we freely construct our identities through consumption overlooks the effect of poverty in restricting such opportunities. 
- **Best** and **Kellner** point out that postmodernism is a particularly weak theory: it fails to explain how the importance of media and consumption came about.

**Theories of late modernity**

They argue that the rapid changes we are witnessing are not the dawn of a new, postmodern era, but that the changes are actually a continuation of modernity itself. - In their view, key features of modernity that were always present have now become intensified e.g. the pace of social change.

**Giddens: reflexivity**

- According to **Giddens**, we are not at the stage of late or high modernity- he says 2 key features of modernity are disembedding and reflexivity.
- Disembedding= ‘the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction’.
Meaning that today we no longer need face to face contact to interact- disembedding breaks down geographical barriers and makes interaction impersonal
- **Giddens** argues that in high modern society, tradition and custom become much less important and no longer serve as a guide of how to act- we become more individualistic and we are forced to become reflexive- monitor our actions.
- Consequently, reflexivity means that we are all continually re-evaluating our ideas and theories. Under these conditions, culture in late modern society becomes increasingly unstable and subject to change.

**Modern and risk**

- According to **Giddens**, in late modernity we face a number of high consequence risks- major threats to human society.
- All of these risks are ‘manufactured’ or human-made rather than natural risks
- However **Giddens** regards the postmodernist view that we cannot intervene to improve matters as false- he believes that we can make rational plans to reduce these risks and achieve progress to a better society.

**Beck: risk society**

- **Beck** is in the enlightenment tradition- he believes in the power of reason to create a better world. However he believes that today’s late modern society (a risk society) faces new kinds of dangers:
  - In the past, society faced dangers as a result of its inability to control nature, such as drought, famine and disease
  - Today, the dangers we face are manufactured risks resulting from human activities, such as global warming.
- **Beck** sees late modernity as a period of growing individualisation, in which we become increasingly reflexive- tradition no longer governs how we act.
- We must constantly take account of the risks attached to the different courses of action open to us. **Beck** calls this reflexive modernisation.
- As a result, ‘risk consciousness’ becomes increasingly central to our culture- we become more aware of risks and seek to avoid/minimise them.

**Risks, politics and progress**

- Postmodernist such as **Baudrillard** reject the Enlightenment project with its belief in the possibility of progress through action based in rational knowledge- **Beck** disagrees with this position.