The whole social system's underpinned by general agreement on values about what's good/desirable or bad/undesirable. Parsons call this general agreement a 'value consensus' / functionalism is seen as a consensus perspective.

A consensus: a general agreement about something. Usually refers (in sociology) to agreement on basic values of society - what's considered right or wrong.

In this context, a consensus doesn't necessarily imply agreement by everyone, but implies vast majority accept central values of society.

- Although all societies share same functional prerequisites, they don't stay static.
- Parsons: however, as they change they retain balance to continue functioning effectively.
- E.g. if there's a period of immigration / a new technology's introduced, societal institutions will adapt to fit around the new elements in society - balance will be restored.
- Parsons called this a 'moving equilibrium'.
- As they develop/evolve, modern societies generally become more effective/efficient at raising living standards and meeting their members' needs.
  Involves change in cultural values or what Parsons calls 'pattern variables'.
- Two sets of pattern variable:
  PATTERN VARIABLES A is more typical of similar, pre-modern societies. More based on emotional ties.
  PATTERN VARIABLES B is more typical of modern societies. More based on rationality and efficiency.
  Only in families, based on close emotional ties, do Pattern Variables B remain centrally important in society today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PATTERN VARIABLES A</th>
<th>PATTERN VARIABLES B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ascription</strong></td>
<td><strong>Achievement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status is ascribed / determined by the family a person's born into.</td>
<td>Status is achieved through a person's own efforts: e.g. through hard work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diffuseness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Specificity</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Giddens: The Theory of Structuration

- **Giddens**: advocates "structuration theory" – structuration = 'structure' & 'action'.
- Represents view structure and action can't be truly separated or examined in isolation.
- **Giddens**: structures make social action possible.
  - E.g. political leaders couldn't act without the civil service, army, police or other state institutions.
- Similarly, students couldn't study their chosen subjects without an organised and structured education system to facilitate their subjects.
- But structures are produced, reproduced and maintained by social actions.
- E.g. the state couldn't be reproduced without the military following orders, nor the education system reproduced without students continuing to study on a daily basis.
- So structures facilitate actions, which then reproduce structures: they're part of the same process.
- **Giddens**: this is the 'duality of structure'.

- **Giddens** view is demonstrated by language.
  - Grammar’s the structure of language. Individuals create the structure by talking and writing in ways that follow grammatical rules.
  - If people start using language in different ways, then grammatical rules will change.

- Similarly, societal structures and institutions are reproduced through people’s actions / but if their actions change, the structures & institutions change.
- If everyone starts acting differently, existing social structures can't survive and will change or disappear.

## Evaluation of structuration theory

- **Archer**: Giddens emphasises people’s ability to change society by acting differently too much.
- He underestimates the constraints under which people operate.
- Supporters of more structural approaches believe it’s harder than Giddens suggests to change society by changing behaviour.
- But even structural theorists like Marx thought actions could ultimately change society (through a proletarian revolution).
- Arguably, the best sociological theories try to understand both structures and social actions.
- Feminists believe most or all existing and historical societies are patriarchal or male dominated. While they disagree over the nature / extent of patriarchy, they agree it exists.
- Feminist theories all try to explain inequalities/differences between men and women / suggest what should be done about them.

**SEX AND GENDER**

- All feminists are critical of view gender differences/inequalities are a product of biological differences between men and women.
- Although some feminists see biology as having some influence, many see it as insignificant, though the meanings attached to biology in particular societies are significant.

- **Stoller:**
  'Sex': biological differences between men and women like differences in genitals, body hair, chromosomes and hormones.
  'Gender': the beliefs about what it means to be 'masculine' and 'feminine' in different societies and the social roles associated with these beliefs.
- The assumption behind this distinction = nothing natural about differences between men and women in any society / the differences are a product of culture not nature.

Oakley: examples of societies where men's & women's roles were very different to contemporary Britain:
- Amongst Tasmanian Aborigines, it was women and not men who did most of the hunting.
- Amongst the Mbuti in the Congo, men are responsible for most childcare.
- In contemporary societies like Israel, women have long featured as front-line troops.

If gender is cultural not biological, roles of men & women in society can be changed for greater equality or to reverse the dominant role of men, so women are dominant instead.
**MARXIST AND SOCIALIST FEMINISM**

- Marxist & socialist feminists: radical feminists exaggerate importance of violence, ideology and/or biology.
- Argue economic factors are key to understanding women’s position in society.
- See capitalist system as main source of women’s oppression.
- Claim underlying factors of women’s lack of wealth/income that prevent them from having as much power as men.
- Stress women are disadvantaged economically as they do more unpaid labour (housewives, mother, carers for sick/elderly).
- Tend to be less successful in employment than men, who have most best-paid jobs.
- Only if women achieve economic equality with men are they likely to free themselves from other inequality.
- To Marxists, this only comes with a proletarian revolution, which eradicates inequalities in wealth between individuals.

- **Engels**: gender inequality had a materialist base.
- In early, primitive communist societies there were no families. People lived in promiscuous hordes (no obligation to be faithful to one sexual partner) → no inequality between men and women.
- Goods were shared / no opportunity for some people to accumulate wealth at others’ expense.
- But when human societies developed herding of animals, men wanted to pass down the cattle they owned to their offspring.
- In the promiscuous horde, men couldn’t be sure who their offspring were, so the institution of marriage was started to control women’s sexuality.
- From this point men came to be dominant in society.
- However, Engels’ theory isn’t based on empirical evidence.

- **Coontz & Henderson**: men became dominant due to practice of patrilocality = wives went to live with their husband’s family.
- Meant men gained control over women’s labour and the wealth they produced / ultimately gave men control over society.
Evaluation of Marxist and socialist feminism

- Fits idea there’s been some reduction in gender inequality, with women working more / more women in higher paid jobs than in the past.
- Fits the continuing gender inequality in society since women still earn significantly less than men on average.
- Marxist feminists often underplay non-material causes of inequality stemming from culture & differences between women, e.g. ethnicities.
- By attributing gender equality to capitalism, they don’t explain continuing inequality in socialist or communist countries.
- Also many aspects of gender differences which have no obvious benefits for capitalists.
- Misleading to argue all women are in low-paid work, as they’re distributed across the workforce / there are many women in professional jobs.
- But there are still few women in the best-paid jobs.
- The average wages of female workers are still much lower than men’s.
- Contemporary socialist feminists like Ward believe globalisation’s undermined income of women working in the UK.
- Due to competition from low-wage economies & welfare cuts.

- Economic inequality’s an important feature of gender inequality but not the only factor maintaining patriarchy.
- Non-material factors (like culture, psychology and use of violence) are also important.
- Wealthy women are still women and can face the same discrimination and sexism as poorer women in everyday life.
- Still more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence or sexual harassment / less likely to get into elite positions in society etc.
- So emphasis on economic issues might be misleading.
- Pornography increasingly shapes men’s expectations of women as sexual partners, esp. as it’s more easily accessible via the internet.

**Evaluation of liberal feminism**

- Its moderate stance has allowed it to improve women’s position in society, without holding out for revolutionary change.
- Reductions in gender inequality since 1970s supports theory that law, social attitudes & culture maintain patriarchal power.
- Adopting this approach has led to worthwhile changes.
- Economic factors may underlie these improvements (*esp. growth of female employment & so female income*).
- Other factors, like attitudinal change/legal changes, are also significant.

- But changes in line with liberal feminism don’t seem to have eradicated inequality between men and women.
- Radical feminists like Greer argue women haven’t been truly liberated.
- Liberation will only occur when women don’t have to be like men, or dress & act how men want them to, in order to succeed.
- Greer: more radical changes in society are necessary.

Some third-wave feminists, like Redfern & Aune argue radical changes are needed to liberate women fully, as many problems remain.
- They advocate more contemporary methods to promote this / like blogging and social media.
- Whatever the limited success in Western societies in reducing inequality, women in the poorer countries of the Global South continue to live in very patriarchal countries.

- Redfern & Aune are criticised for underestimating how much greater equality has been achieved in countries like Sweden & Norway

- Redfern & Aune: there’s been some progress on demands of second-wave feminists from 1970s, but there’s much for third-wave feminists to achieve before women are fully liberated.
Incredulity towards metanarratives and technical language games

Also, according to Lyotard, the metanarratives of sociology (like Marxism, feminism and functionalism) are/should be rejected.

- 2nd: As a consequence, the search for some ultimate truth is abandoned and metanarratives are replaced by 'technical language games'.
  Technical language games aren’t about searching for the truth, but more about looking for 'what works' on a small scale.
  People search for useful knowledge, e.g. developing new technology / new ways to reduce the crime rate, rather than for a complete theory of how to improve the world.
- Postmodern society thus isn't organised on the basis on a grand plan.
  Instead, it's based upon the production & exchange of knowledge that can be sold as it serves some useful purpose.
  This is a situation that Lyotard welcomes.
  With people no longer trying to terrorise others by imposing a theory on them, society becomes characterised by tolerance, diversity and creativity.
  Everyone can live their lives as they choose, solving short-term problems & playing around with their identities, not worrying about an ideal / progress / a perfect society.

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**BAUDRILLARD**

Like Lyotard, Baudrillard thinks society's entered a new and distinctive phase of postmodernity.

But he places more emphasis on the role of the mass media in this process.

- **Baudrillard**: in contemporary societies, the mass of the population expresses a lack of interest in social solidarity and in politics.
- The hallmark of this postmodern society's the consumption of superficial culture, driven by marketing and advertising.
Their research suggests audience are perfectly capable of thinking about the reality behind TV images and they can somewhat distinguish 'media hype' from 'more authentic accounts'.

- Postmodernists often portray people as free to consume whatever they want in the world.

Haralambos & Holborn: postmodernists overlook how culture’s shaped by capitalist economy & differences in what the rich and poor can afford to consume. So class and other social divisions remain much more important than postmodernists assume.

**HARVEY: MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF POSTMODERNITY**

- Harvey: Unusual for a neo-Marxist / he’s within a framework that argues we’ve entered a postmodern era.
- Postmodernity involves fragmentation of society and a move towards image and superficiality in culture.
- Harvey agrees this has occurred because of economic changes in the 1970s and the response of capitalists, not the rejection of metanarratives.
- Due to rising oil prices, capitalist profits fell, which led to a move away from manufacturing to commerce, media and retail as the main employers.
- With the development of globalisation, these changes produced massive changes in capitalism.
- They’ve also led to what he calls ‘space-time compression’.
- Space or distance have become less important in social life because of digital communications and faster travel.
- It’s much less important where you are in the world. E.g. money, images and ideas can be moved very quickly.

- Responding to these changes, capitalists sought new sources of profit through the creation of new areas of commerce - what he calls ‘flexible accumulation’.
- They particularly sought to make money through rapid changes in products (rather than through longer term mass production) & through the manipulation of identity, with developments in fashion, travel and new music.
- If people can be persuaded they must constantly reinvent themselves / change their identity by buying new fashionable products & services > capitalism has an unlimited demand for its products.
- Globalisation has been utilised to produce cheap goods, which are given added value by being marketed in the more affluent nations.

At the same time, Harvey points out real changes that have affected capitalism:

- National governments are less powerful than in modernity / so change is now at the global level, rather than national.
- Real political discourse within traditional frameworks of governments & political parties are replaced by image politics = what appears to happen is more important than what actually happens.
- Social class as the dominant form of division between members of societies is joined by divisions like gender, ethnicity, sexuality and religion.

But Harvey remains convinced the capitalist economic system & the social divisions it produces = driving force behind social change in the contemporary world.

So he’s highly critical of postmodernists like Lyotard / Baudrillard who believe modernist ways of analysing the social world, like Marxism, are outdated.

From Harvey’s perspective, real changes can be studied, understood and their consequences analysed. Ways of making social life less oppressive can be considered and evaluated.

Unlike other postmodernists, Harvey doesn’t dismiss idea progress is possible & doesn’t believe that modern approaches to understanding social life should be abandoned.
The Relationship Between Sociological Theories & Research Methods

THEORY & CHOICES IN RESEARCH

- When conducting research, sociologists’ topic can be influenced by their theoretical position, as theories suggest to the researcher which topics/issues are most & least important.
- **Functionalists** are often interested in topics related to social cohesion and social order.
- **Marxists** are drawn to topics related to class differences and economic inequalities.
- **Feminists** often focus on topics relevant to gender inequalities.
- **Interactionists** lean towards topics concerning small-scale interaction in groups.
- The influence of theory on topics isn’t rigid / most theories can be applied to many topics/issues.
- A theory pushes sociologists in certain direction rather than determining what they’ll research.
- Other factors, like practical constraints & ethical issues, are also important.
- Theory can be more influential regarding choices about methodology. Other influences are practically & ethical issues.

FUNCTIONALISM & METHODOLOGY

- **Functionalist theories** of society concentrate on analysis of role/function of societal institutions.
- Doesn’t necessarily require empirical research to think about functions of the education system, religion or the family.
- Often uses thought experiments based on what would happen if these institutions stopped working.
- So there’s no clear & close relationship between basic ideas of functionalist theory and particular research methods.
- Functionalists thus use different approaches to try to understand the role of institutions in society.
- E.g. **Murdock** used many secondary sources to look at nature & role of the family in 224 different societies. **Parsons** relied mainly on abstract theorising.
The location and circumstances of the death. E.g. people who were killed on a railway track were more likely to be seen as suicidal if they had no reason for being in that location.

Consideration of the biography of the deceased, with a history of mental illness, a disturbed childhood or evidence of depression all seen as important indicators of suicidal intent.

**Atkinson:** the statistical patterns in suicide reflected the assumptions that influenced the decisions of coroners, rather than any underlying causes of suicide.

**Atkinson** can be criticised for assuming that it’s impossible to determine whether or not a death is a suicide.

In some cases, there may be overwhelming evidence, leaving no real doubt.

His approach has also been attacked for being too relativistic – seeing all knowledge as a matter of opinion.

If all data is a matter of interpretation, there’s no reason to accept his account of the factors shaping suicide statistics any more than an alternative account.

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**CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY**

- Critical sociology (or critical social science) – approaches that regard society as being oppressive and exploitative.
- This incorporates a range of theories including Marxism, neo-Marxism, feminism, anti-racism and theories of sexual oppression, such as homophobia.
- These theories have in common a determination to be critical of society to produce social change.
- They’re being manipulated to serve the interests of the powerful (e.g. by disguising the extent of poverty, unemployment, racism or domestic violence).
- But, with the range of theories involved, it’s not surprising no single research method’s used by these theorists / feminists esp. have devised distinctive methods of their own.

**Harvey** believes, however, that critical social research has common features:

- Concern with abstract concepts and ideology.
  Critical social scientists claim beliefs about the social world may be distorted by the powerful (e.g. by producing racist, patriarchal or homophobic beliefs).
- **Lyotard** sees all knowledge as a form of storytelling. While some theories may be more convincing, that doesn't necessarily mean the convincing stories are true.
- However persuasive, they're still just stories.

- Postmodernists who follow this approach like **Tyler** support postmodern ethnography = the researcher and those studied work together to produce an account of the social world, as experienced by the research subjects.
- **Tyler**: there should be no assumption that this description of the social world is superior or more true than other descriptions.
- It's still important different descriptions are made.
- **Tyler**: this shows a postmodern world in which social life's fragmented / it's impossible to find a single way to understand complex, ever-changing societies.

- Postmodern methodology often supports qualitative above quantitative methods.
- Prefers techniques like in-depth interviews and participant observation.
- These methods are more appropriate than more statistical techniques for producing different stories.

**EVALUATION**

- Postmodern method abandons any attempt to provide explanations for social phenomena.
- Instead offers multiple descriptions with no suggestion as to which are more credible.
- Without explanations, it's impossible to suggest solutions.
- In this instance, postmodern methodology means there is no basis for intervening in the social world & trying to solve social problems.
- Many critical sociologists thus see postmodern methods as conservative and supporting the status quo.
- For many sociologists, valid descriptions of the social world should be the starting point for sociological research, not the end point.

**THEORY, TRIANGULATION & MULTIPLE METHODS**

- There's no direct relationship between perspectives on society and methods used to study society.
Some theories (like interpretivist ones) are closely tied to particular research methods but researchers following the same broad perspective often use different methods.

This is partly as the link between theory and methods is quite often a loose one due to practical and ethical factors intervening.

Sometimes, the most ideal method for a researcher to use isn't practically or ethically possible.

E.g. in the study of suicide, it's not possible to interview people who have actually committed suicide as they're no longer alive.

Also there may be ethical concerns about interviewing vulnerable people at risk of suicide.

Differences within perspectives may point towards different methods (e.g. Marxists might use more quantitative data & neo-Marxists might use more qualitative data).

Many sociologists don't adhere to one particular perspective.

There's a trend in contemporary sociological research towards using a mixture of different theories/perspectives when studying the social world.

**SUICIDE & METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM**

In the study of suicide, methodological pluralism = Scourfield et al.

Study was based upon a mixture of quantitative evidence (advocated by positivists) & qualitative data (supported by interpretivists and phenomenologists).

Scourfield et al: accept Atkinson's point that suicide verdicts may not be entirely reliable.

But argue that it's possible to produce reliable statistics on suicide if sociologists critically examine evidence about deaths & evaluate it to determine which deaths really were caused by suicide.

They believe once the statistics have been refined, it's reasonable to use them to understand structural causes of suicide.

But it's also useful to look at qualitative data to understand circumstances and likely motives behind suicide.
### 2.5: Sociology & Science

#### WHAT IS A SCIENCE?

**THE POSITIVIST APPROACH**

Durkheim’s positivist methodology, illustrated by his study *Suicide*, is the most influential / based on principles:

- There are objective social facts about the social world. These facts can be discovered directly through the senses / in particular they can be observed or seen. Facts can be expressed in statistics.
- Such facts aren’t influence by the researcher’s personal opinion (subjective viewpoint) or their beliefs about right and wrong (values). If sociologists use appropriate research methods that avoid becoming subjectively involved (e.g. using questionnaires instead of participant observation), they can remain objective.

In his study of suicide, Durkheim used official statistics that he assumed were objective. Durkheim was therefore an empiricist.

*Empiricism*: the view that knowledge comes from sensory experience (e.g. seeing, hearing, touching).

It often downplays the importance of theory.

- Having collected statistics (which Durkheim saw as facts) about the social world, you can look for correlations (patterns in which two or more things tend to occur together).
- Correlations may represent causal relationships = one type of fact causing another (e.g. hypothetically it may be proposed that religion causes suicide or prevents it).
- Careful analysis of the effects of different factors (independent variables) is needed to check correlations represent genuine causal relationships. *Today, this is usually done through computer programs like SPSS - The Statistics Package for Social Scientists."
- Durkheim believed that, in following this approach, it’s possible to discover laws of human behaviour - causes of behaviour generally true for all societies.
Durkheim believed that, human behaviour can be explained by external stimuli (things that happen to us) rather than internal stimuli (what goes on in the human mind).

To be scientific, you should only study what you observe.

So it's unscientific to study people's emotions, meanings or motives, which are internal to the unobservable mind of the individual / therefore can't be studied objectively.

2 key features of Durkheim's approach that distinguish it from other attempts to explain how sociology can be scientific:

- It's approach is *inductive*.
  In trying to explain how society works, you start by looking at the evidence and from that you induce theories.
  These are then tested against the evidence.
- It's based upon verification.
  Theories can be confirmed / verified through the collection of evidence.

**Induction**: starting with the evidence & examining it to derive a theory to explain it.

Deduction involves starting with a theory and testing it by working out what evidence will verify or falsify it / then collecting the evidence (e.g. in an experiment).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivist and sociology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not all sociologists who adopt positivist methods accept all features of Durkheim's idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.g. many don't claim universal laws of human behaviour can be discovered; just claim they've found correct explanations for social life, in a particular place at a particular time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction has been strongly criticised and alternative scientific approaches developed, like Popper's.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durkheim's view is still influential / gives simple answer to whether sociology can and should be scientific.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From his view, any sociology that used objective statistical methods, based on data produced by direct observation, is scientific.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not all sociology fits this description, but Durkheim thinks any aspect of social life can be studied in this way.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- But Popper suggests he wouldn’t consider most sociological research to be scientific.
- Still, Popper regarded it as desirable & possible for social scientists to be scientific.
- It just required precision, rigorous testing and a willingness to admit when you were wrong if your theory was falsified.

- Popper's approach, although supportive of scientific methods, raises questions about how far scientific knowledge, even the natural sciences, should be believed.
- In his view, even the most rigorously tested knowledge is ultimately open to question, since it might be proved wrong in the future.

**QUESTIONING SOCIOLOGY AS SCIENTIFIC: INTERPRETIVIST SOCIOLOGY**

**SOCIOLOGICAL CRITICISMS OF SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE**

Since the 1960s, with the growth of interactionist and (later) postmodern writings, there’s been criticisms as to whether sociology should can claim to be a science.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences between the nature of society and the physical world</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Some argue society’s incomparable to the natural world &amp; to attempt to transfer the methods &amp; ideas of the natural sciences is a mistake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- This argument is less about methods, more about reality of the world around us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There may be an objective world outside that exists independently of us or the world’s ‘constructed’ through meanings given to it by human beings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interpretivist &amp; interactionists: meanings like people’s self-concepts shape and influence their behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- People attach meaning to the world around them and have motives for acting in particular ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- E.g. you can’t understand / explain crime without reference to why people chose to break the law.</td>
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</table>
Critical social scientists, inc. feminists and Marxists: sociology should be used to change / improve the social world by exposing injustice, inequality & oppression.
- But they may be reluctant to work within existing power structures (like the state) if they believe it's impossible to prevent them from supporting capitalist or patriarchal interests.
- E.g. so moderate Marxists & liberal feminists are more likely to work with existing institutions.
- But radical feminists and Marxists would be more likely to seek change through protest movements.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL POLICY AND SOCIOLOGY

- New interventions in the social world - by governments and others - can lead to new sociological research.
- E.g. sociologists have devoted considerable attention to studying effects of government policies in areas like education, welfare, health and crime.
- Sociologists have investigated effectiveness of CCTV in crime prevention / the effect of academies on educational attainment / the effect of health service reforms on class differences in mortality.

- So, the type of sociological research that gets done is directly shaped by government priorities.
- Most government funding for sociology is distributed through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
- It's likely to provide funding for research directly concerned with impact of government policies, maximising value for money & achieving government aims.
- Effectiveness of research is then measured through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) / measures impact of research on world outside academia.
- So sociologists who want successful careers are likely to take into account uses of the work / might bend their research towards issues of government concern.
- Although some sociologists try to distance themselves from these influences, they're difficult to resist.
- Most research is expensive, so such funding is crucial to what gets done.
- With increased pressure on academics to bring in financial support for research and to get their work published, funding's becoming increasingly important.