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ECISO4001: Understanding Society: An Introduction to Sociological Theory

Key Terms
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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Welcome to the module!

- Today we'll be learning key terms related to sociology:
 - Sociological Perspectives (Paradigms)
 - Sociological Theory
 - Theoretical lens
 - Micro, Meso and Macro levels



What is 'theory'?

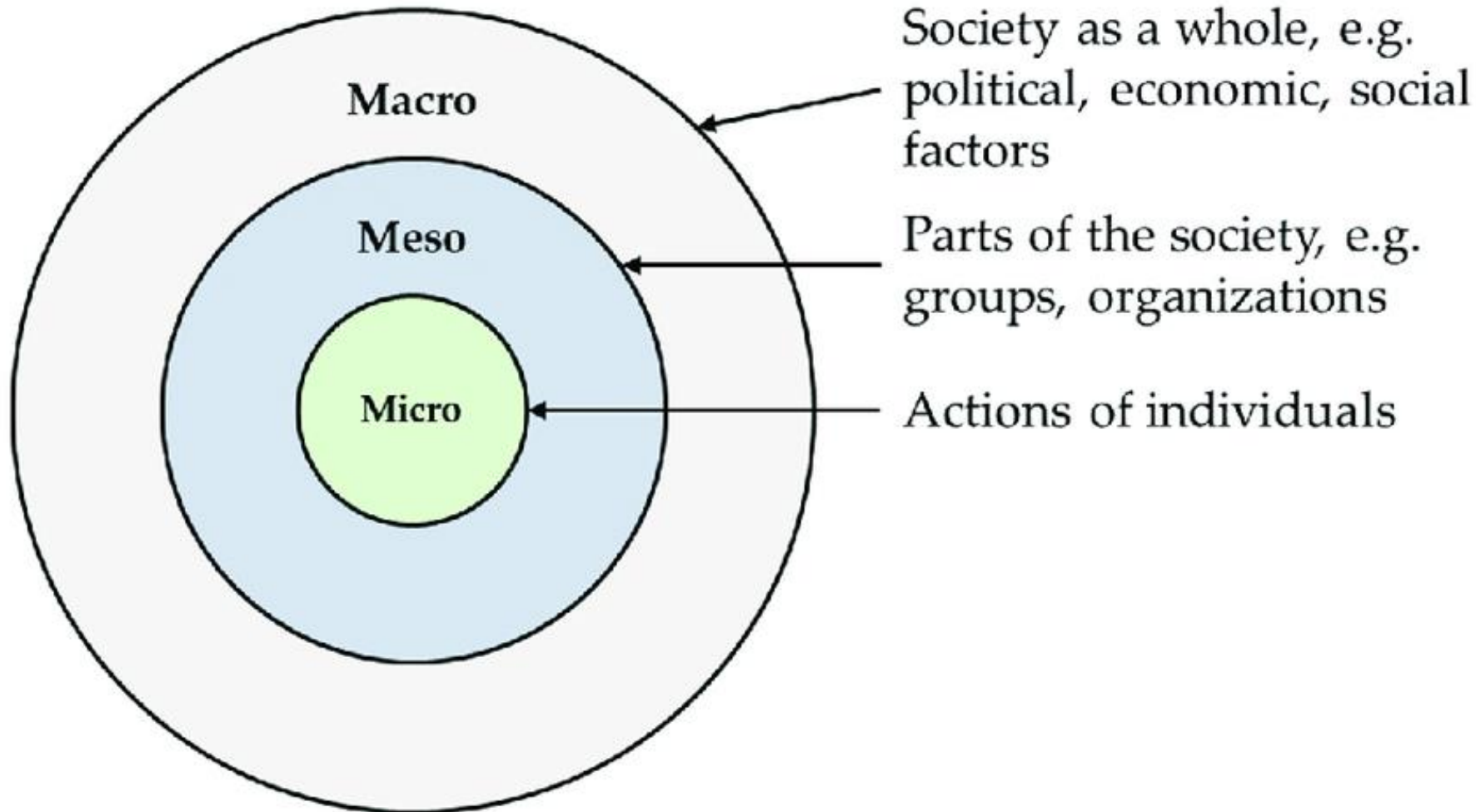
- Take a moment and in pairs/as a group, think about what 'theory' means?

Sociological Theory

- “A theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for something. A sociological theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for human society” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 953)
- Traditionally, “social thought has been dominated by a very narrow social stratum: white, heterosexual, middle-and upper-class European men who were based in powerful Imperial states, and who wrote only in English, French or German” (Loyal and Maleševic, 2021, p. 8)

Micro, Meso and Macro

Levels of social analysis



These can help us understand how society functions at different levels



Take a moment and as a group, think of examples of micro, meso and macro levels?

Micro: The smallest level of analysis in the social sciences

- Individuals:
 - Behaviours
 - Perceptions/understandings
 - Lived experiences
 - Emotions
- Inter-personal relationships:
 - Small groups
 - Families
 - Friendships

Meso: A population size that falls between the micro- and macro-levels

- Mid-level structures
 - Religious groups
 - Hospitals
 - Schools
 - Colleges
- Context surrounding the individual
- How groups interact
- Community
- Organisation
- Institutions

Macro: The largest level of analysis in the social sciences

- Looks at society as a whole
 - Global
 - National
- Political systems
- Economic systems
 - War
 - Poverty
- Culture

Understanding poverty at the micro-meso-macro level

- Micro: Individual level
 - Experiences of living on benefits (practical / emotional)
 - Housing
 - Impact on mental health and wellbeing
 - Impact on physical health
- Meso: Mid-level
 - What community support is there? (e.g., food banks/charities)
 - How are organisations helping/ not helping (e.g., schools / GPs)
 - Local council (e.g., housing provision)
- Macro: Large scale
 - Government policies (e.g., state welfare / housing)
 - Political parties
 - Global poverty (e.g., impact of the financial crisis)

Paradigms / Perspectives



Are frameworks that give a particular 'point of view'



Guiding principles or belief systems



Provide a 'lens' through which to 'see' society at micro, meso and macro levels



A set of concepts that help shape your perspective on a certain topic

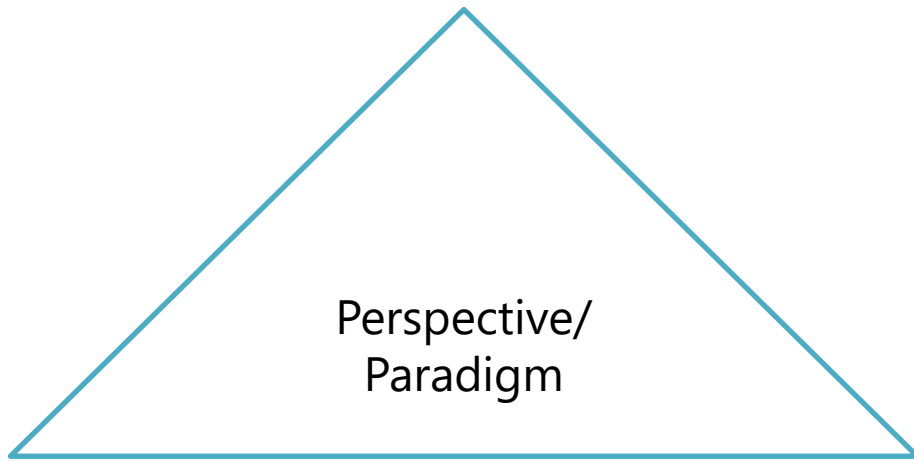


Sociological paradigms describe schools of thought that include multiple theories from the same school of thought

Paradigms

- “A paradigm is a set of assumptions and perceptual orientations shared by members of a research community. Paradigms determine how members of research communities view both the phenomena their particular community studies and the research methods that should be employed to study those phenomena” (Donmoyer, 2008, p. 591)

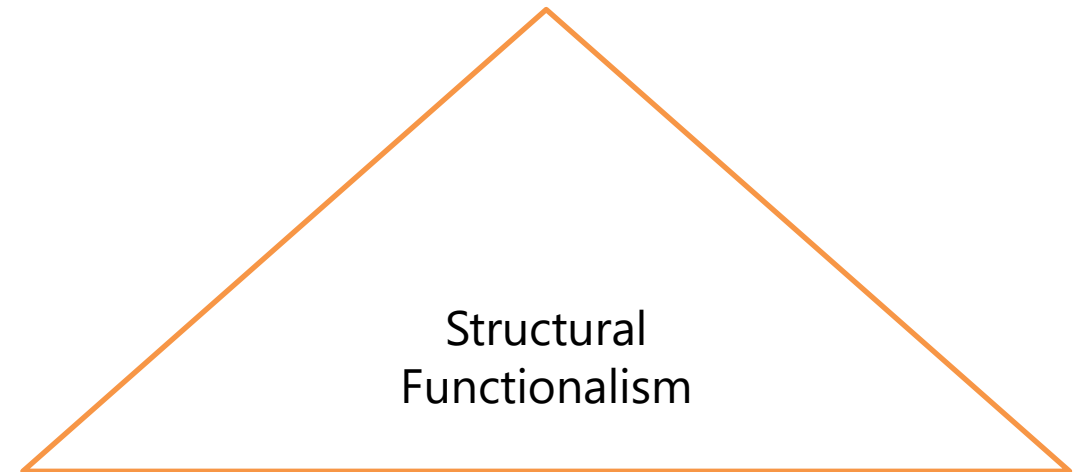
Understanding Perspectives/Paradigms and Theory



Theory

Theory

Theory



Social
Facts

Functional
Prerequisites

Latent &
Manifest
Functions

Three main perspectives in sociology:

Structural Functionalism

- Societal Behaviours
- Patterns of Behaviour
- Macro-Level

Symbolic Interactionism

- Reality through interaction
- Social Interaction in specific situations
- Micro-Level

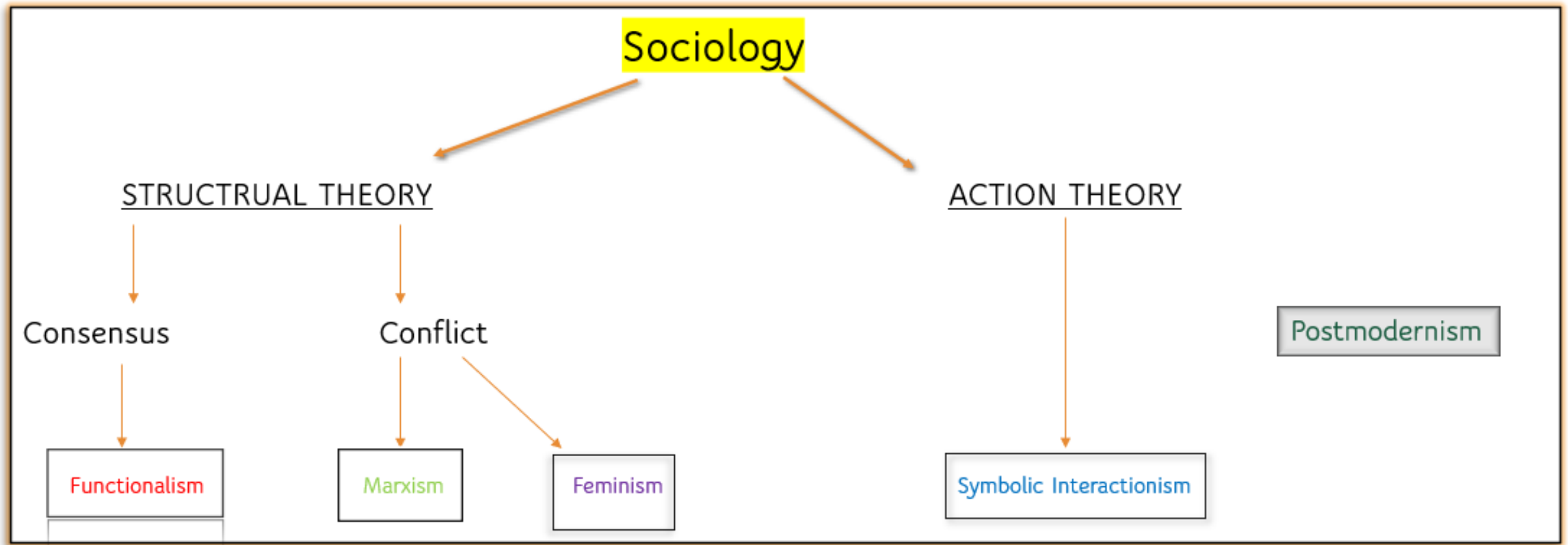
Social Conflict

- Unequal society generating conflict and change
- Dominant Vs. Disadvantaged
- Macro-Level

The 5 sociological perspectives

- Structural functionalism
- Conflict Theory
- Symbolic Interactionism
- Feminism
- Postmodernism

Sociological Perspectives



Structural vs. Action (taken from Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 953)

Structural Theory

- Macro perspective
- How society works as a whole
- Functionalism: how society helps meet our needs
- Conflict Theory: how society rests on economic foundations with a bigger structure above. Can lead to social class conflict.

Action Theory

- Micro perspective
- Does not deny social structure but emphasises the importance of human behaviour
- Society is a product of human behaviour, not the other way around.
- Symbolic interactionism: examines the ways people interpret the actions of others, develop self-image and act in terms of meanings.

Theoretical Lens

- Theory can help us 'see' society in a particular way. Different theories can help us view society in different ways. We call this the 'theoretical lens'.
- E.g., if your sociological perspective is Feminism, your theoretical lens could be gender socialisation.



Using your “sociological imagination”

- In 1959, C. Wright Mills argued that social scientists need to use our “sociological imagination” to connect individual problems/experiences to society.
- This is a way to connect the micro to the meso and macro levels.
- He defined it as: “the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society” (Mills, 2000 [1959])



Throughout the rest of the module, we will look at each sociological paradigm in greater depth.



References

- Donmoyer, R. (2008) Paradigm, in Given, L.M. (ed) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods: Volume 1*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Haralambos, M. and Holborn, M. (2013) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (8th ed.). London: Collins
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- Mills, C.W. (2000) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.