



Prifysgol Cymru
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University of Wales
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ECAY5006

Health and Social Care: Disability and Wellbeing

Theme 3: Sociological Perspectives on Health & Wellbeing

Part 1: Structural Functionalism and Marxism

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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The 'big 5' Sociological Perspectives

Functionalism

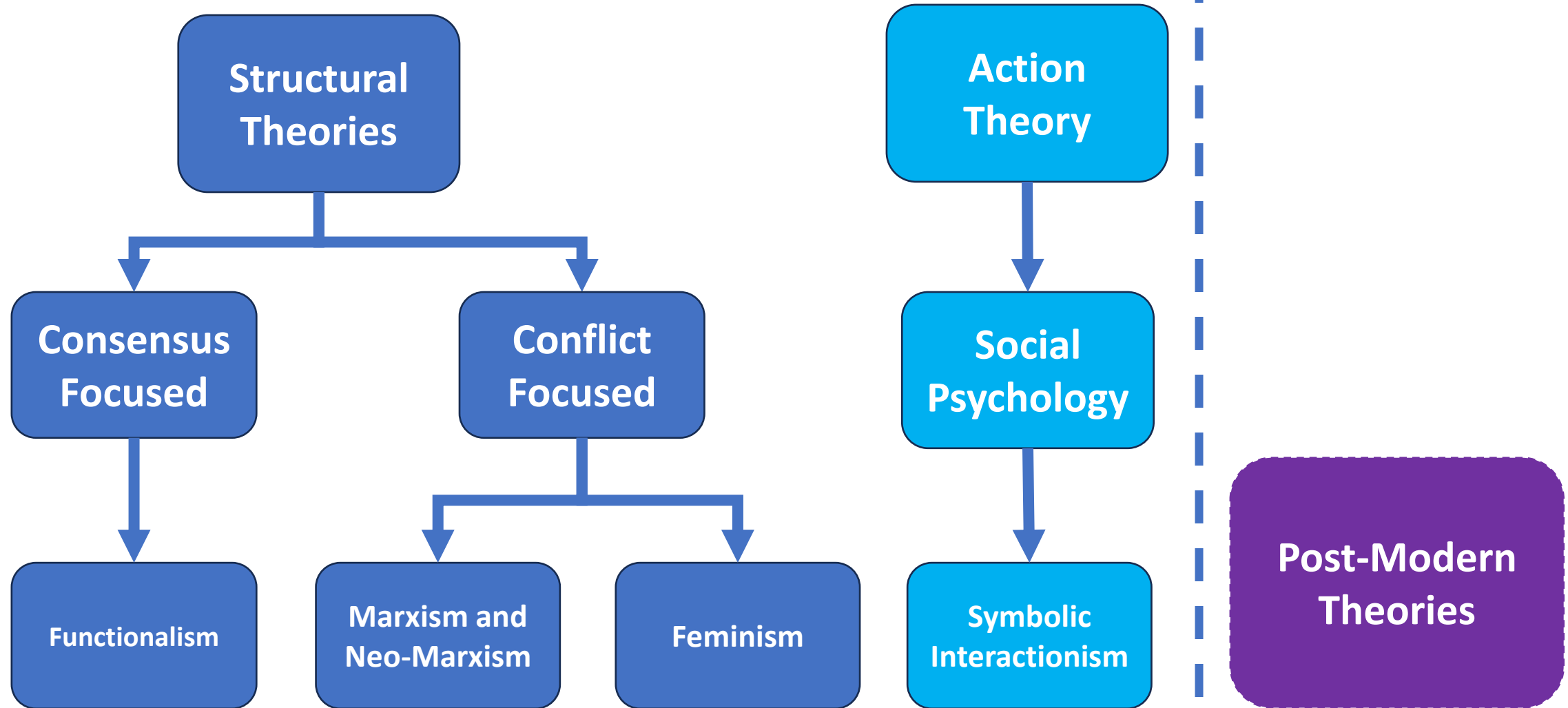
Conflict Theory

Symbolic Interaction

Feminism

Postmodernism

Sociological Perspectives



Structural vs. Action

(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’.
- For example, if your sociological perspective is Feminist, your theoretical lens could be gender socialisation and health inequalities for women.
- Or, if your sociological perspective is Functionalist then your theoretical lens could be the effects of ill-health on the economy

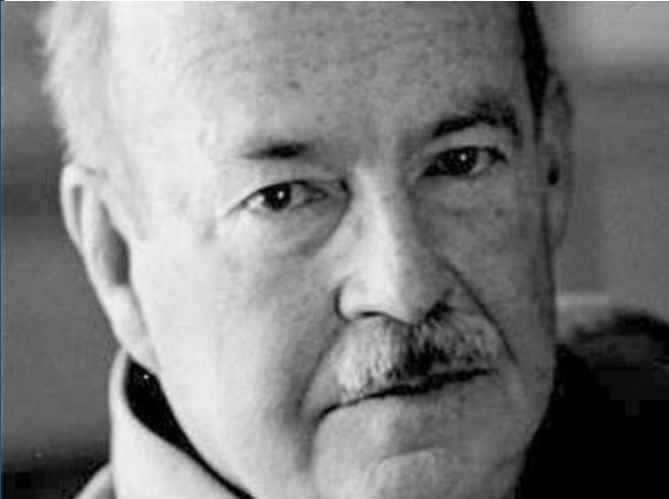
Sociological Definitions of 'Health'

- Sociologists distinguish between disease and illness
- **Disease:** biological or clinically defined abnormality
- **Illness:** a person's subjective experience of being unwell
- However, this definition may overemphasise the biological over the socio-political (Thompson, 2011, p. 123).
- Which has led to a further distinction;
- **Sickness:** the social and functional consequences which follow disease or illness (Miles, 1991, p. 3).

Structural Functionalism



Structural Functionalism and Health



- Functionalists believe that society needs to work cohesively (value consensus)
- Sickness can disrupt that cohesion
- Talcott Parson's 'Sick Role' is the central theory to Functionalism's understanding of health
- The 'Sick Role': an unwell person must understand that their sickness is undesirable and do everything they can to get better (e.g., seek medical advice/treatment)
- Parsons (1951) saw illness as a form deviance an ill person is no longer contributing to a fully functioning society

Structural Functionalism and Health

- The functionalist perspective on health views good health and effective medical care as essential for the smooth functioning of society.
- Physician-Patient Relationship: This perspective emphasizes a hierarchical relationship where the physician provides instructions, and the patient is expected to follow them to recover and return to their societal roles¹.
- Overall, the functionalist perspective highlights the importance of health and healthcare systems in maintaining societal order and stability

“Therefore, like crime and any other form of deviance, illness needed to be controlled in some way, and the deviant helped or forced into performing their social role once again”

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 303)

Value Consensus

- This concept underpins Structural Functionalism
- This means individuals within a functioning society should share a set of values, norms and beliefs



What values and norms regarding health and illness can you detect in your society?

Conflict Theory (Marxism)



Marxist Theory and Health



- Medicine is used to ‘define normality, punish deviance and maintain social order’ (Haralombos and Holborn, 2013, p. 305)
- Navarro (1983) believes capitalism benefits from medicine in three ways:
 1. Medicine keeps people healthy to contribute to the economy. Definitions of health are linked to the ability to produce goods. Healthy = productive, unhealthy = unable to produce wealth
 2. Masks structural influences on health (social class/gender/ethnicity). The individual is seen as being at fault for being ill.
 3. Medicine emphasises biomedical reasons for illness and promotes the use of drug treatments which is profitable

Marxist Theory and Health

- The Marxist perspective on health focuses on the relationship between health and the socio-economic structures of society. For example:
- **Health Inequalities:** Marxists argue that health disparities are a direct result of the capitalist system, which creates and perpetuates inequalities. The wealthy have better access to healthcare, nutritious food, and healthy living conditions, while the poor suffer from inadequate healthcare, poor nutrition, and unhealthy environments.
- **Healthcare as a Commodity:** Marxists view healthcare under capitalism as a commodity that is bought and sold for profit, rather than a universal right. This leads to a healthcare system that prioritizes profit over people's well-being.
- **Economic Determinants:** According to this perspective, socio-economic status is the primary determinant of health outcomes. Poor working conditions, low wages, and job insecurity contribute to poor health among the working class.

Inequalities in Health

- Indeed, theorists such as Bambra (2019) have argued that there is a clear link between where a person is born and lives and their health outcomes and life expectancy.
- This is borne out by data compiled by the [Office for National Statistics](#) which shows that 'Age-standardised mortality rates (ASMRs) for all-cause mortality and most individual conditions were generally highest in the most deprived areas and among people who were long-term unemployed or had never worked'
- It can also be illustrated by use of the interactive map which the Welsh Government has created based on the [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) (WIMD)

Healthcare as a Commodity

- An example of the interface between capitalism and healthcare would be the use of breast implants (Annandale 1998)
- US company Dow Corning manufactured implants made of silicone gel from 1963 onwards
- By the 1970s surgeons complained the gel was leaking causing health problems
- However, the regulatory body (Food and Drugs Administration) refused to intervene
- By the late 1990s there were multiple cases of ill health linked to the silicone implants
- Dow Corning paid \$4 billion in compensation

The 'Corporatisation' of Healthcare

- This phrase was coined by McKinley & Stoeckle in their study of the US healthcare system in the 1980s
- They identified a growth in chains of 'for profit' hospitals across the US and globally
- Whilst they found that the services to patients did not differ greatly between 'for profit' hospitals and 'not for profit' they did identify one significant difference
- This was the fact that the 'for profit' chains were constantly seeking to keep salaries low and reduce the power of staff
- They called this process the 'proletarianization' of medical professions

Private contracts and the NHS

- The awarding of NHS contracts to private companies is often criticised by left wing sociologists and commentators
- In 2019, it was reported that private firms were handed £15bn in NHS contracts over the previous five years ([Campbell, 2019](#))
- The value of contracts given to non-NHS providers increased by 89% since 2015, from £1.9bn to £3.6bn a year (Campbell, 2019)
- During the pandemic, £24.4 billion of private contracts have been awarded by the government
- 60% of this value has been awarded for products and supplies, while 39% was dedicated to procuring services.
 - contracts for personal protective equipment (i.e., PPE)
 - Test and Trace Programme (e.g., coronavirus tests and testing service, NHS COVID-19 app)
 - contracts for hospital supplies (e.g., medicines, hospital beds and ventilators)
- The bulk of contracts were awarded by the Department of Health and Social Care, mostly for PPE and Test and Trace

Private contracts and the NHS

- Although journalists have to report truthfully, they are often biased and base their reports on information from other sources and it is best practice to seek out these other sources as they are more reliable, for example:
- The National Audit Office is the official government department that oversees and reports on Government spending
- [Investigation into the management of PPE contracts - NAO report](#) (NAO, 2022)
- In their report they state that there is a risk that £2.7 billion was overpaid to private companies for projects that might not provide 'value for money'
- It is this misuse of public money (i.e. taxes) to pay private companies that contemporary Marxist sociologists would criticise
- But the criticism also comes from the medical profession itself as when Gareth Iacobucci (2024), writing in the British Medical Journal states that 'The Department of Health and Social Care's accounts for 2022-23, published on 25 January, show that £9.9bn of the £13.6bn worth of PPE that it bought between 2020 and 2022 was unusable or its value had plummeted since it was purchased.
- [Government wrote off almost £10bn worth of unused PPE during pandemic, accounts show | The BMJ](#)

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