

ARE PEOPLE THE "PUPPETS OF SOCIETY"?

What makes people behave in the ways they do? Are their actions determined by forces beyond their immediate control or are they able to choose and select their behaviour with an element of free choice? This is one of the oldest problems philosophers and social scientists have grappled with and it still emerges in many debates today as the example below illustrates.

The problem has led to a long running disagreement in Sociology known as the **structure/action** debate. This refers to two different theories (or explanations) of the way we behave as members of social groups. Put very simply, the two sides of the argument look something like this:

SOCIAL STRUCTURE THEORY

Our behaviour is controlled by the organisation and structure of the society in which we live. To some extent we are like "puppets" of society. →

Example

"Unemployment and educational failure will force working class kids into anti-social behaviour. The chronic lack of affordable facilities in inner cities adds to a despair which leads to drugs and crime."

SOCIAL ACTION THEORY

Society is the end result of the way people choose to act, we are not controlled by it. Almost all our actions are based on our own understanding of the world around us. →

"A young person may view their future with anxiety and this could lead to their choosing to be very conventional in the hope of their "getting on", but could result in other possible behaviour, perhaps becoming a New Age Traveller."

Within each of these perspectives there are differences of emphasis and opinion. Within **social structure theory**, for instance, two distinct perspectives can be identified:

Functionalism

Functionalists try to explain why societies are ordered and stable rather than in chaos. They are interested in the predictability of our behaviour. Most people most of the time seem to follow some sort of unwritten rule-book of behaviour in the way they speak, dress and act. Functionalists have studied the reasons why we conform and how we learn unwritten social rules. They emphasise the process by which society moulds the behaviour and personalities of its members. This process is referred to as **socialisation**. According to functionalists we are **socialised** into **norms**, **values** and **roles** through our involvement in social institutions (or **agencies of socialisation**) such as the family, schools and the mass media.

The idea of roles provides a good illustration of the way behaviour is **determined** by the **social structure** in functionalist theory, as you can see from the following example:

Role	Norms	Values
The role of a woman in the nuclear family.	These are accepted ways of behaving, such as "the woman cooks the childrens' tea".	Norms are based on more general values: beliefs about what is right and wrong, such as "women should be primarily responsible for the care of children".

The wife's behaviour is, to some extent, therefore, controlled by the role she plays. If she deviates from the norms associated with the role then people may think she is "odd" or "not a good wife".

Marxism

Marxist sociologists also use a structural analysis in which an individual's behaviour is heavily influenced, if not wholly **determined**, by the structure of society. But Marxists have a much more **negative** view of this process than functionalists. They believe that most societies are extremely unfair, containing vast **inequalities** which mean that a few benefit at the expense of the majority. Because of the way society is organised people have conflicts of interest: what benefits one group may not benefit another.

These differences of interest influence their behaviour:

Position in Society	→	Interests	→	Behaviour
Owner of business (or capitalist)		To make the largest profit possible		so they attempt to pay their workers as little as possible

If it is in most people's interest to fight for better pay and, Marx believed, ultimately to overthrow capitalist society in favour of communism, how is it that so many people do not behave in this way? How is it that so many seem satisfied with their place in society? Marxists believe that the **agencies of socialisation** such as the mass media and education system are controlled (directly or indirectly) by the powerful or dominant class in society: the capitalists. This means that the roles, norms and values people are encouraged to accept are those which are in the interests of the powerful (or **ruling**) class. Marxists call these ideas **ideology** or **dominant ideology**. They would argue that human greed is not something we are born with but rather part of an ideology which we have been taught and which serves the interests of capitalists in their pursuit of profit.

A Social action perspective: interactionism

Structural perspectives tend to focus on large scale social structures and institutions such as the education system. This approach is sometimes referred to as **macro Sociology**. In contrast, social action perspectives such as **interactionism** are more interested in people's behaviour in small groups, relationships within an individual classroom rather than the education system as a whole for example, an approach known as **micro Sociology**.

Interactionists believe people behave as they do partly because they are influenced by the behaviour of others towards them. They also suggest that we "figure out" particular situations we find ourselves in and act on the basis of that "figuring out". To put it another way, we select our behaviour on the basis of the **interpretation** or **meaning** we give to situations. The following situation provides an example of this:

You go to a party at a friend's house. You walk through the door and immediately have to "make sense" of what is going on before you choose what to do. What kind of people are at the party? How are they behaving? What rooms are there? What is going on in them? Once you have "made sense" of, or interpreted the situation, you will decide whether to stay, go or come back later, which room to go to, who to talk to, what to do and so on.

This is very unlike the **structural** accounts we have been considering. Here is a person relatively free from structural constraints or controls, making active choices regarding how to behave based on their own **meanings** and **interpretations**.

The basic difference between structural and action perspectives is shown in the diagram below:				
Structural perspective				
SOCIETY or SOCIAL STRUCTURE	→	controls	→	behaviour
Action perspective				
PEOPLE'S INTERPRETATIONS of the world around them	→	influence	→	behaviour

So are we the "puppets of society"?

You must think about this for yourself. Most sociologists today accept that both **structure** and **action** are important in understanding social behaviour. The two positions are better seen as the opposite ends of a continuum rather than as clear alternatives. Most sociologists "fit" somewhere between the two positions. Recently, the British sociologist **Anthony Giddens** has developed **structuration theory**. This is an attempt to get round the structure/action debate by incorporating both structure and action in the same theory. In Giddens' view they are two sides of the same coin. People do make choices and act on their interpretations of the social world, but their choices are constrained by the structure of the society they live in. You have made a decision to study sociology but that decision will have been influenced by a number of factors to do with contemporary society such as, what is the employment situation in the area where you live? How does society view sociology qualifications? Can you afford to follow the course?

SOCIAL STRUCTURE THEORY

Here are two pieces of writing which illustrate the **social structure** view that our behaviour is, to a large extent, controlled by the society in which we live; by its organisation and culture. We are the "**puppets of society**" in other words. One account represents a **Marxist** view, the other a **functionalist** view.

MARXIST VIEW

A

The radical or Marxist view says that working class children are supposed to fail. The schools are shaped by (the needs of) the capitalist system. In this system only a few can succeed. Working class kids must have their ambitions "cooled out".... they must be made to accept working class jobs with their inferior opportunities, rewards and conditions and achieving this through ideology is preferable to physical force. Just as factories produce products, schools are ideological sausage factories, producing pupils with the correct attitudes, disciplines and docility needed by capitalists. According to this view, it is hardly surprising that most working class kids fail - they're supposed to.

adapted from P. Willis, unpublished lecture notes

THE "PUPPETS OF SOCIETY"

B

FUNCTIONALIST VIEW

C

Consensus theory (functionalism) argues that a society's cultural rules determine, or *structure*, the behaviour of its members, channelling their actions in certain ways rather than others. They do so in much the same way that the physical construction of a building structures the actions of the people inside it. Take the behaviour of students in a school. Once inside the school they will display quite regular patterns of behaviour. They will all walk along corridors, up and down stairs, in and out of classrooms, through doors and so on. They will, by and large, not attempt to dig through floors, smash through walls, or climb out of windows. Their physical movements are *constrained* by the school buildings. Since this affects all students similarly, their behaviour inside the school will be similar - and will exhibit quite definite patterns. In .. (functionalism).. the same is true of social life. Individuals will behave similarly in the same social settings because they are equally constrained by cultural rules. Though these *social structures* are not visible in the way physical structures are, those who are socialised into their rules find them pretty determining.

P. Jones, "Studying Society", Collins Educational, 1993

ACTIVITY

1. In Item A, Paul Willis describes Marxists as seeing the school as an "ideological sausage factory". What do you think he means?
2. Items A and C emphasise the importance of the process of socialisation in encouraging conformity. Apart from schools, give two examples of institutions in society that socialise people and, for each, give two examples of the methods they use to encourage conformity.
3. In Item C the author states that people socialised into cultural rules find them "determining". Using examples, and the cartoon in Item B, explain what he means.
4. With reference to your own experience of school, consider whether pupils always conform in the ways described above? If not, in what ways do they rebel?

SOCIAL ACTION THEORY

Here are two pieces of writing which illustrate the **social action** view that our behaviour is not determined by social forces but rather is the result of a process of "figuring out" or **interpreting the meaning** of the world in which we live and then choosing how to act. The first extract describes **interactionism** (the main social action perspective) and the second is taken from **Eileen Barker's** research into people choosing to become Moonies. It is very much a feature of Barker's research that young people sometimes **choose** to join New Religious Movements and are not controlled or coerced by sect leaders.

A

INTERACTIONIST VIEW

Nearly all human behaviour is voluntary. It is the product of a conscious decision to act in one way rather than another. Nearly everything we do is the result of choosing to act in one way rather than another. Furthermore this is purposive or goal-orientated choice. We choose between courses of action because, as humans, we are able to aim at an end or a goal and take action to achieve this. Nearly all human action, therefore, is intentional action: we mean to do what we do in order to achieve our chosen purposes. From this point of view, societies are made up of individuals engaging in a countless number of meaningful encounters. The result is social order. But this is no determined order. It is not the result of the imposition of cultural rules as the functionalist sees it nor is it the result of the constraints of a world where advantages are unequally distributed.... as the Marxist sees it It is the result of numerous interactions, carried out by interpreting, meaning-attributing actors who can make sense of the social settings in which they find themselves and who choose to act accordingly.

adapted from P. Jones "Studying Society", Collins Educational, 1993

B

JOINING THE MOONIES

Plenty of reasons have been put forward to explain why young adults will do things which seem to their elders to be wrong-headed, irresponsible, incomprehensible, bizarre or insane. Youth is a time for idealism, rebellion and experimentation. If one happens to come from the advantaged middle classes one can afford the luxury of denying oneself luxuries while following idealistic pursuits. Enjoying the health of youth and unencumbered by immediate responsibilities, one can disclaim material interests - at least until one has "matured" sufficiently to abandon extravagant fantasies, settle down, accept and probably uphold the pursuits and values of conventional society.

We have seen that not all young people flock to find out what the .. (Moonies) .. have to offer - in fact, the majority of them express an extreme distaste not only for the movement as it has been publicised, but also for the many beliefs and practices which it embodies. How do some of these young people come to see it in a different light?

E. Barker, "The Making Of A Moonie", Blackwell, 1984

C

"VERSTEHEN" SOCIOLOGY

Originating largely with Weber, the central idea of an action approach is that the sociologist should proceed by seeking to "understand" those he studies. He should attempt to look upon the world in the same way that they do, should seek to appreciate how the world looks to them. He should, additionally, seek to grasp the ideas, beliefs, motives and goals which move people to act This emphasis on "understanding" the social factor has resulted in this approach being known as verstehen (or understanding) sociology. *E. Cuff and G. Payne, "Perspectives in Sociology", Harper Collins, 1984.*

ACTIVITY

1. In Item A Philip Jones says that we "choose to act one way rather than another". Give an example of this from your own experience and explain how you came to make your choice.
2. In what ways does the interactionist account in Item B differ from functionalist and Marxist sociology?
3. In Item B why does Eileen Barker think young people tend to make decisions that older people find so odd?
4. Why does Barker's account of people joining the Moonies fit better with a social action than a social structure theory?
5. What methods of research do you think advocates of "verstehen" sociology (Item C) might favour? Why?

ARE PEOPLE THE "PUPPETS OF SOCIETY"?

The following extracts take the discussion beyond the argument between social structure and social action theories. **Anthony Giddens** and **Paul Willis** argue for the existence of a society "out there" which constrains or to an extent determines our behaviour, whilst at the same time accepting that people are creative, choosing actors whose fate is not "determined".

In Item A Willis describes the way people react to unemployment; both as victims (not eating, not going out, demoralised) and also as actively **resisting** the effect of being jobless. In Item B Giddens tries to go beyond the structure/action argument. Using the system of money as an example he accepts that it controls the way we behave but he points out that it is people going about their daily business who "make and remake" that system. He calls this process **structuration**. "Social structures" like the family or the money system exist and shape our behaviour but they only exist in so far as we create them through our everyday actions. As Giddens puts it, structure and action are two sides of the same coin.

A

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRUCTURE AND ACTION

Unemployed young people find that their severely limited financial resources make their lives very frustrating, and, worse, demoralizing. As Linda in Sunderland reports:

"When you've been out on the dole for as long as us, you just can't afford to go out and it drives you round the bend - day after day. Then the bairn's asking for money or toys or clothes and you can't give any of them to her and you feel terrible - you end up not eating so she'll be the same as other kids at school - not shabby looking."

Nor do most of these young people believe their lives will change for the better in the next few years. Many of them who went on training schemes found that they learnt very little.

.... Despite this poverty and demoralization unemployed people do attempt to express (and) develop themselves. Linda has become the chair of a housing co-op. Holding this post has brought her to perform well a number of tasks which she would have thought impossible for a person as "thick" as she considered herself to be:

"What I've learnt these last three years is amazing - part treasurer's job, how to do rents, how to organise repairs, chair meetings - and it's just great the things you can do if someone takes the time to help you to learn how to do them."

P. Willis, "Common Culture", Open University Press, 1990

B

THE MONETARY SYSTEM

Social institutions do precede the existence of any given individual; it is evident that they exert constraint over us. Thus, for example, I did not invent the monetary system which exists in Britain. Nor do I have a choice about whether I want to use it or not. The system of money, like other established institutions such as the family, does exist independently of any individual member of society, and constrains the individual's activities. However, if everyone, or even the majority of people, at some point decided to avoid using money, the monetary system would dissolve.

The way forward in bridging the gap between the "structural" and "action" approaches is to recognise that we actively make and remake social structure during the course of our everyday activities.

adapted from A. Giddens, "Sociology", 2nd. ed. Polity Press, 1993

ACTIVITY

1. Referring to Item A, explain how the unemployed can be seen as both "victims" of the social structure and not victims at all.
2. Explain in your own words how Giddens argues that the monetary system controls our behaviour but can also be changed by human action.
3. Give two examples which show how the existence of the social institution of the family might constrain our behaviour.
4. Give one example to show how people might reject an aspect of the family and, in doing so, help bring about changes in the family.
5. Considering all the evidence presented to you, to what extent do you think people are "puppets of society"? Use evidence and examples to justify your argument.