

**A LEVEL SOCIOLOGY (AQA)**

**SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY:  
ESSAY QUESTIONS**

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## **EXAMINER INSIGHT SERIES**

### **ANSWERING ESSAY QUESTIONS ON SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES**

#### **INTRODUCTION – USING THIS EBOOK**

The purpose of this ebook is to help candidates improve the quality of their answers to questions on AQA Paper 3. Many candidates fail to maximise their marks on this type of question because they do not fully understand what examiners are looking for in answers. There are several '**Examiner Insight**' boxes in the ebook which give clear indications of what an examiner will be thinking as they read answers to this question.

**Section 1** outlines the three skills of Application, Analysis and Evaluation. With 12/20 marks for these skills, it is very important for candidates to demonstrate them as often as possible in their answers. Examiners will not just be looking for appropriate knowledge (8/20 marks) but for these other skills as well. The sort of annotations that could be used by examiners are indicated here and used in the specimen essay answers.

**Section 2** offers some general guidance for essays on theories. Of particular importance is the part that explains why questions often use 'approaches' rather than just 'theories'. This is there to encourage candidates to use not just theory but also methods, methodological issues and the topics they have studied such as education and crime.

**Section 3** takes each theory in turn. For each theory the range and type of essay questions that could be asked about the theory are identified. There is then a substantial Examiner Insight box which identifies and explains many of the key issues with questions on approaches/theories. There follows an example question which is briefly deconstructed and an example essay with a commentary in the left-hand side bar. This commentary applies the kind of annotations that an examiner would use. The essay is a top mark band answer to show how the skills of Application, Analysis and Evaluation can be presented. It is very useful to pay special attention not just to what is written in the essay but also to what an examiner might put by way of annotation. For some theories there are one or two 'quick de-codes' of alternative questions.

**Section 4** does the same as in Section 3 for possible questions on the relationship between sociology and science, values and social policy.

There is a short podcast supporting this ebook. Email [lindpress@aol.com](mailto:lindpress@aol.com) to receive a copy

### 3.1 CONSENSUS THEORIES

There are two main consensus approaches, functionalism and neo-liberalism/New Right. Their starting point is that there is a fundamental agreement in society about norms and values.

Questions can be asked about consensus theories in general or specifically on functionalism. As consensus approaches also offer an analysis of the structure of society, it is possible to get a question on social structuralist or social systems approaches in general, but this is unlikely at this level. However, a question asking candidates to compare consensus and conflict approaches is possible.

#### **Example questions:**

- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the contribution of consensus approaches to our understanding of social behaviour.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the contribution of functionalism to our understanding of social behaviour.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the claim that consensus approaches are of little value because they fail to take into account the degree of conflict in society.
- Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the claim that consensus approaches are more helpful than conflict approaches in understanding society.

## **EXAMINER INSIGHT!**

### **1 Why do questions often refer to 'approaches' rather than theories?**

'Approaches' is a broader term than 'Theories'. So although the question wants a focus on functionalist and neo-liberal theories, effective answers can also make appropriate reference to methods as well as making links to topics and methodological issues such as value-freedom in research.

### **2 Should comparisons be drawn with other theories?**

Using alternative theories such as Marxism, feminism and Social Action approaches is very useful, although not simply as blocks of knowledge at the end of an answer. They should be integrated into the material on functionalism as evaluation. So an essay with five paragraphs on functionalism followed by one on Marxism, one on feminism and another on Social Action theories, will not work as well as an answer that feeds the last three paragraphs into the functionalism material as evaluation.

### **3 What does 'the contribution of an approach to understanding society' mean?**

Questions often use this phrase. It can be taken two related ways. One is to examine the consensus theory itself, looking at its central concepts, how they interlock logically and what their strengths and limitations are. A second way is to look at what the approach has to say about topics such as education, crime and religion. This often demonstrates the skill of Application. Although top band answers can come from either of these routes, some combination is very effective. The example essay takes this route.

### **4 What aspects of consensus theories should be covered?**

- Is it a social systems or social action approach?
- The issues are they mainly concerned with such as how does society survive?
- Key concepts such as functions, structural differentiation, underclass etc.
- Major studies
- Application to issues such as working-class educational underachievement, single parent families and crime.
- Variations such as Durkheim, Parsons and Merton.

## EXAMPLE QUESTION AND ANSWER WITH COMMENTARY

### Question

Applying material from Item C and your own knowledge, evaluate the contribution of functionalism to our understanding of social behaviour.

(20 marks)

### Deconstructing the question

Although the origins of functionalism go back to Durkheim and others, Parsons produced the most definitive version of this approach. Answers should identify the key elements in his macro, structural theory including how society is a system with needs and institutions that function to meet those needs. The basis for social order is agreement about social values. Social change is seen as gradual through structural differentiation. Evaluation of functionalism can come from Merton's critique, feminism, Marxism and interactionism. Further assessment can be through examining how well it explains late modern or postmodern society.

### Answer

**Th** *'Originating in the work of Durkheim and Comte, functionalism was the dominant sociological perspective until the 1960s. Durkheim argues that a society has to be studied as a whole in order to understand its component parts. In particular, sociology should focus on the functions these parts play in contributing to the well-being of the whole society.*

**An** *For example, Durkheim saw that although crime is a threat to the social order, some degree of crime performs an important function for society's health by reaffirming society's values through its response to those crimes.*

**App of issue**

**Concepts** *Fundamental to functionalism is the claim that societies are social systems that largely determine how individuals act in ways that meet the needs of society. In order to survive, society faces four problems. Adaptation refers to the need for the social system to adapt to its environment and this requires regulation through norms and laws.*

**An** *Societies also set goals which social sub-systems and individuals work to meet. A major concern is for society to maintain cohesion through integration and to deal effectively with any deviant behaviour which threatens its stability.*

**An** *Finally, in order to continue into the future, a society needs to maintain its values through the socialisation of new and current individual members. This approach is very 'top-down' and social action theorists challenge this 'over-socialised' view of social behaviour, arguing that it underestimates the degree to which individuals have free will and are able to choose how to act.*

**Eval** *Rather than society determining behaviour, they believe the reverse is true, people's actions shape society.*