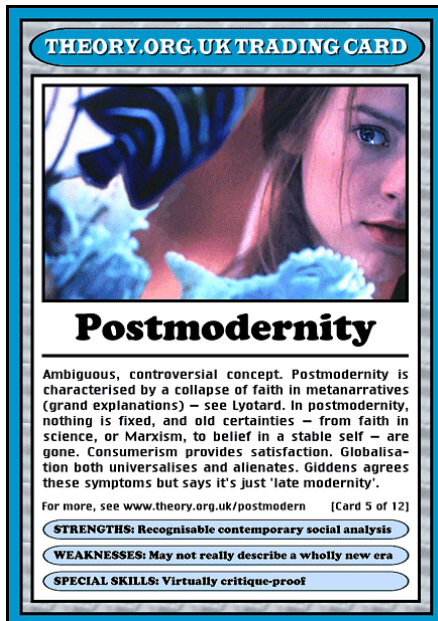


Social Inequality

Unit 05



What are critical theories of inequality?

Learning targets:

- Critical Theory refers to writing in a Marxist tradition
- Critical theories refer to any types of writing that challenge traditional ways of thinking
- Critical theorists tend to use methods that challenge traditional thinking on research processes and so may ask respondents to design the research process themselves

Key questions

(AO1) What is the Marxist view of society?

(AO1) What causes inequality according to Marxists?

(AO2) What are the strengths of the Marxist view?

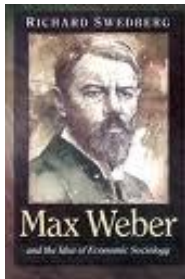
(AO2) What are the weaknesses of the Marxist view of inequality?

Summary of Key Points

"Critical theory" is a type of thinking associated with German writers in a Marxist tradition. The aim of **Critical Theory** (with capitals) is to emancipate or free humans from the ideology of capitalism.

"**critical theories**" (without capitals) refers to a variety of social movements that identify how humans are dominated and which then attempt to describe that domination and address it. A critical theory provides a basis for research and attempts to challenge people's typical and traditional ways of thinking. This term is used to address recent thinking related to gender, race and sexuality in particular.

Why is Max Weber important to sociology?



Although critical theories draw on Marxism, another early sociologist is also associated with critical theories. He is Max Weber (1864 -1920) and he is known as one of the founders of sociology. Weber differed from both Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim because he did not view the study of society as a scientific discipline. Durkheim was concerned to apply the methods of science to sociology and Marx considered his views to be scientific and rational. Weber however was concerned with the notion of **verstehen**. **Verstehen** translates as 'understanding' in German. Weber used the term **verstehen** to refer to the understanding of why people act as they do bearing in mind the context that they are acting in. Weber stressed that humans have a variety of motives that include emotions, traditions and rational choice.

In terms of critical theories it is necessary to understand what Weber said about the study of society. Weber said that all science is based on interpretations and belief, so it cannot be objective or value free. Thus there is no such thing as objective truth based on science because science itself is based on human assumptions. In order to understand reality, one has to select what is important about the ideas that people have about the world. It is the values held by individual people that determines their actions and beliefs. It is this set of beliefs about the nature of sociological enquiry that have given rise to a form of sociology known as ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology is slightly different from traditional sociology because traditional sociology assumes that there is such a thing as society which can be studied. Ethnomethodology attempts to discover how that social order is created in people's minds. The impact of this on methodology is that there is no agreed set of methods for people to use; they must create methods that are appropriate to what it is they are seeking to discover.

What did Weber say about inequality?

Karl Marx saw inequality in terms of the ownership of wealth and the control of material possessions. This is a very simple view and does not take into account all of the other forms of inequality we experience in society. Weber was aware of Marx's writing and disagreed with him. Weber said that inequality is more complex than that. He described power as being the ability to influence others to do your will and claimed that power had a number of sources such as ownership of land and capital, social status, physical strength and education.

Weber saw stratification in terms of the relationship between class, status and party. Status is related to inequalities that are to do with the way in which people judge and relate to each other. Class is to do with inequalities that have their source in the workings of capitalism and the market place. Party is related to concepts of politics in its broadest sense. Weber says people form groups and organisations to look after their own interests.

Status is formed out of the tendency of people to judge each other. We all value some characteristics and

despise others. When we do this as members of a social group towards members of other social categories, then we are according them a social status. Some groups will benefit from having a high status, but others may well be treated negatively. In our society, for instance, membership of certain racial groups implies worth, so that non-membership of high status groups then disadvantages those who come from ethnic minorities. The disadvantages of belonging to a low status group, such as membership of an ethnic minority, can leave people in poorly paid, low status occupations and with little hope of advancement.

Wealth and economic advantage are a significant element of class. Weber suggested that the increasing bureaucracy that accompanies capitalism leads to status differences between those members of the working class who are manual workers and those who offer services to capitalism through the exercise of professional skills such as the middle classes. Weber suggested that there would be a growth and increase of classes linked to differences in educational skills and qualifications and the power that these confer on workers in the labour market.

Karl Marx believed that the social classes would polarise, with some people becoming ever more rich and powerful while others would become poorer. Weber said that there would be ever more social classes developing in capitalist society. Class would depend on our life chances and our life styles. Class would be characterised by such things as accents, education, locality, leisure habits and spending.

What is Weber's theory of stratification?

Max Weber, like Marx, begins his analysis of class from an economic point of view: 'property and lack of property are ... the basic categories of all class situations'. Weber's use of the word property is similar to Marx's view of capital or means of production. But where this was the starting point for Marx, for Weber his starting point is to recognise that people are individuals. He says that within each class there are major social divisions based around status and what he calls 'party'. By 'party' he means any organisation (such as trade unions, professional associations, etc) that helps their members pursue their common interests. Such common interests can be summarised as market position. Weber's analysis can therefore be described as 'gradational' in contrast to the 'relational' approach of Marx. Weber identified four different 'constellations' of class:

- The dominant property-owning and commercial class;
- The white collar intelligentsia;
- The petty bourgeoisie (owners of small businesses);
- The manual working class.

These different class groupings have distinct market situations which either privilege them or make them more vulnerable. Weber introduced the important sociological concept of life chances which refer to the opportunities (or lack of them) individuals have for success in education, employment, housing, health, etc. Within the market economy propertyless individuals depend upon the skills they can offer, and the relative scarcity of these skills improves their market position. For this reason, the highly qualified have a different class situation from those with no qualifications. Weber's theory of social class is based on the view that class divisions and inequalities reflect different life chances in the market and that a person's class position is determined by the job market. Because such markets serve to divide and sub-divide classes, the result is differentiation between groups of employees becomes increasingly complex. With this view we could not be further from Marx's dichotomous view of a society of just two classes.

Weber presents a view of society as becoming split into smaller groups or increasingly fragmented, in contrast to Marx's prediction of an increasingly polarized society. Weber's key point is that within class there is further differentiation in terms of status that reflects the different amounts of social standing individuals and groups have. Weber's analysis of status and market position can usefully explain social differences in society. For example, in the workplace women, the disabled, the elderly and many minority ethnic minority groups have found themselves discriminated against, irrespective of their class position. Therefore people occupying the same class position may well be distinguished by differences in status. For the individual, their status may be more significant than class as a source of identity. Weber thus sees class,

status and party as cross-cutting.

Weber's approach is useful precisely because it allows us to describe the complex reality of contemporary society. However, Marxists argue that his concepts of class and status groups lack the close relationship with a theoretical position that Marx's concept of class exhibits. They question Weber's concept of status group, arguing that life chances are primarily shaped by class location more than anything else.

How did feminism built on Weberian thought?

One of the earliest movements influenced by Weberian ideas of research was feminism. It is easy to think of feminism as being one single approach to the study of society, history or literature, but in fact, there are a number of different approaches to feminism. The most commonly identified forms of feminism are liberal feminism which argues for gradual change in the roles of women, Marxist feminism which sees capitalism and gender as enemies of women and radical feminism which criticises patriarchy and views masculinity as an enemy. Black feminism sees both racism and masculinity as issues for Black women. There are very strong differences between each of these approaches and different feminists are as likely to disagree with each other as to write against masculine society. What all feminisms share in common is a sense of anger and a sense that research should enlighten women and challenge patriarchy.

Feminisms tend to argue that empirical, scientific approaches to research are masculine in approach. They reject the notion of value free and objective sociology, claiming that it is 'malestream' and ideological thought. According to Millen, what makes feminist research feminist in intent is that it is politically motivated and that it intends to have a role in changing social inequality. It considers the experiences of women and provides a context for the understanding of female issues. The researcher may actually become part of the research process. Feminist research acknowledges that the politics of the researcher influences the findings and actually views this bias as a strength of the research process. It is this type of thought that makes feminism a critical theory of society.

The feminist researcher will be guided by feminist principles and will attempt to study issues of gender inequality. Mies says this means that the researcher must have a commitment to transform gender relationships in our society. In addition, the study group should have its consciousness raised. Fine and Macpherson, for example, interviewed respondents over dinner so that rather than simply interviewing, the study process became an opportunity for open debate and discussion. Both Oakley and Finch claimed that increased equality in the relationship between the researcher and the researched gave rise to better quality and more valid data.

How do feminists account for inequality?

Women have long challenged the privileged position of men in our society. Women were challenging the position of men as early as 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft published her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Early feminists were able to point out that men prevented women from having legal or political rights and much early feminism challenged very obvious and clear discrimination. In the 1960s, while women still did not have a right to full equality with men, the focus of the challenge changed. Women began to address issues of how men treated women in the workplace and wider society. They looked at the patriarchal structures of society.

Many writers, particularly in the functionalist tradition, have argued that inequality is functional to society and comes about as a result of the differing biology of men and of women. This type of thinking was apparent in Parsons' work as recently as the 1960s.

Strong challenges have been issued by feminists who have looked at reasons why women are manifestly unequal in our society. Walby, claims in *Patriarchy, Structure and Gender Inequality* that patriarchy operates in a different fashion in the public sphere and in domestic life. Individual men are able to dominate individual women in the home whereas in public life women are excluded from a whole range of

spheres of activity. In public life and in work the discrimination is institutional, so women are not able to participate equally with men. Haug found that German women work for more hours in the home than men do. This finding echoes that of Oakley who also discovered that British women were far more likely to work long hours in the home than their male partners.



Radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone argued women do not know what it is to be female because femininity is defined for them by men. Many radical feminists such as Greer looked for ways to identify and develop a female culture and way of being which was free from the influence of males. Greer viewed the traditional family as an institution of oppression whose purpose is to foster gender inequality through the socialisation of children into gender roles. It subordinates women by forcing them to conform to feminine stereotypes. Radical feminists such as Brownmiller often point to the violence that is directed against women in society. They see it as endemic (built into every social structure and interaction). Violence can range from explicit attack, such as domestic violence, through to simple threat, so that many women fear going out at night and thus do not have the same freedom as males.

Liberal feminists such as Gavron suggested that women are trapped by traditional roles within the family and that they should have more choice with regard to marriage and family life. More recent feminist theories have suggested that men oppress women through control of the body and what is considered sexually attractive. Modern writers in this tradition include Jane Pilcher and Naomi Wolf, though many writers have also pointed out how women have adapted and moulded their bodies to appeal to men.

Marxist feminism suggests that gender inequalities arise out of capitalism itself and that women will never be equal with men until a classless society can be established. Barrett argues that the domination of men over women in the family is simply an echo in the family of capitalist domination over workers. The cause of inequality is capitalism and the solution is the dismantling of capitalist economic structures and ideology. In contrast to all of the above forms of feminism, post modern feminist writing challenges the view of women as the victims of gender relationships. Catherine Hakim, for example, claims that women often choose part time work to fit in with their home lives.

How do postmodernists account for inequality?

Postmodernism is a relatively recent development in sociological thought. Thinkers in this tradition reject both functionalism and Marxism as being unable to explain the changes that are taking place in modern cultures. Post modernist ideas are very controversial in sociology and have given rise to complex debates and arguments. Modernism is a term used to describe a belief that humans can improve their culture and society. Marxism is therefore a modernist mode of thought, because it believes that societies progress to something better.

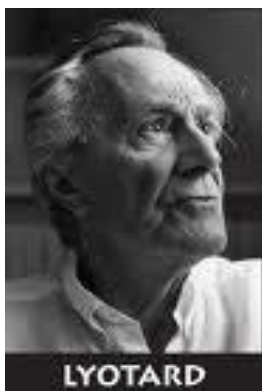
Postmodernism (after modernism) describes theories that see all culture and theory as relative. There is no such thing as a 'better' world, just a different world. Post-modernists talk of discourses. A discourse is a particular way of thinking about a topic such as gender. A modernist might look at how gender affects behaviour and consider how equality may be achieved between genders. A postmodernist would not try and find any definite answers as to how the genders differ, but would try to look at how gender itself is defined by other people and to consider why we have such a concept. For a post modernist, all reality is relative to what other people think. Postmodernism can also be applied to the research process and it is when research uses postmodernist thinking that it can be described as critical theory, because it breaks all of the traditional rules of research and uses unconventional techniques to understand how people think and feel about their world.

Baudrillard, a well known postmodernist, says that there is no knowledge that can be assumed by other people. We live in a society with a two-minute attention span. Rojek gives examples of how people live in an unreal world of theme parks and consumerism. People create their own identity by what they buy rather than by reference to people around them. Hebdige suggests that consumer identities are developing

in modern Britain. Postmodernists are likely to look at the media and other cultural artefacts to see how people buy into identities. They suggest that society is becoming fragmented and diverse (as Weber did in his analysis of class) so that communities are breaking down and there is no such thing as a value consensus.

The implication of this for the study of inequality is that there is no such thing as inequality as such.

Inequality is a modernist idea because those who try to describe it and then study it consider it to be a problem that has some resolution. Post modernists would suggest that people only develop a sense of inequality when the issue is of importance to them for some reason. Thus, the study of inequality becomes an issue for individuals and not for groups within society.



Lyotard is not a postmodernist as such; he describes society as being post-modern. He claimed that a postmodern society is typified by social disorder and a cultural vacuum. By this he means that modern societies have no central core of values or belief. Post-modern societies have few community links, people have no sense of identity within society and there is no sense that one should keep and treasure things like old buildings or furniture forever. Everything is short term and disunited.

People do not know their neighbours, travel a long way to work and no longer feel the need to unite with others for better working conditions for everyone. People watch television or play computer games as an alternative to talking to one another. Thus, post-modern societies see a collapse of traditional bonds and people are unaware of their true position in the social structure.

What is social exclusion?

The government of the UK has been moving away from traditional concerns with poverty and inequality and moving towards a concept derived from critical theories of society. Rather than tackling the traditional enemies of poor people (the five evils): squalor, want, idleness, ignorance and disease, since the 1980s, government initiatives have been set up to tackle social exclusion. Social exclusion is not a well-defined term, despite the way that it is commonly used in literature relating to inequality, poverty and deprivation. It is related to the ideas of postmodernism and critical theory however because it describes what may happen in a fragmented society. The UK government definition of social exclusion is a little vague despite the desire of New Labour to tackle the consequences of social exclusion. The British government defines it in the following way: 'Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime rates and family breakdown. These problems are linked and reinforce each other. Social exclusion is an extreme consequence of what happens when people don't get a fair deal throughout their lives, often because of disadvantage they face at birth, and this disadvantage can be transmitted from one generation to the next.'

Social exclusion is a far wider concept than poverty or inequality. According to government thinking, it consists of a set of personal characteristics that allow people to progress through life, and it is seen as being a cultural phenomenon as much as anything. In 2008, the Social Exclusion Task Force said, 'Many people suffer one or more forms of disadvantage. For example, they may live below the poverty line, have a long-term illness or struggle with basic literacy. This does not however necessarily mean that they are socially excluded. Research shows that if certain protective factors are in place (such as supportive parents for children) then outcomes in later life are much more positive'. There have been a number of government strategies and programmes set up to deal with issues of social exclusion such as Sure Start and the Communities programme. Lack of opportunity is tackled by policies that prevent social exclusion and promote social inclusion. The Government has said it will promote social inclusion, through the following strategies: helping provide individuals with opportunities to participate in work and learning; removing barriers to participation in society; helping children and young people develop the skills and attributes which will secure their inclusion as adults and building stronger communities

The notion of social exclusion and the policies put in place to tackle it are related to a notion known as 'The Third Way' which is an attempt to combine socialism and also to support traditional capitalism. The Third Way was a political philosophy which drew on the ideas of Anthony Giddens, one of the UK's most prominent sociologists. The notion of the Third Way has been criticised for providing middle class voters with a sense that their interests will be cared for by low taxation and strong financial policies, whilst poorer people will be given a sense that something is being done to look after their needs and interests. Ruth Lister (2000) claims that that the 'third way' offers a very conditional form of social inclusion. It does not set out to offer solutions to problems of poverty and deprivation. She points out that it is, 'conditional on the willingness of citizens to exercise responsibility to include themselves through paid work and educational training for it and to grasp the opportunities being opened to them.' Thus only the very weakest are offered targeted support, other people must choose to accept it and be seen to be working at the problem of their own poverty and deprivation.

What should you have in your folder of notes on this topic? (AO1)

Key concepts

Define the key concepts and ideas.

Black feminism
Critical theories (without capital letters)
Critical Theory
Discourse
Fragmented society
Ideology
Liberal feminism
Male stream
Marxist feminism
Modernism
Postmodernism
Radical feminism
Relative
Social exclusion
Third Way

Independent study

Compulsory

- Make separate revision cards for each of the researchers and theories mentioned in these notes
- Create a list of the strengths of Marxism, using textbooks and the Internet to help.
- Create a list of weaknesses and criticisms of Marxist views of inequality using textbooks and the Internet to help

Extension work

- Create revision cards for the new language that you are learning.
- Create a mind map or poster to promote Marxist ideas and explain them in simple terms
- Use a textbook to find out more about Braverman and Olin Wright.

Useful websites and sources of information (AO1):

All of the Sociology textbooks in the LRC will have a large amount of material on this topic and you should read as much as you can.

You should use the website of the NGfL Cymru and look at the ebook to develop your notes

<http://www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/sociology-as-ebook-a2>

Answer these questions in your notes

- 1. What is the difference between Critical Theory and critical theories?
- 2. What is the similarity between Critical Theory and critical theories?
- What did Max Weber believe about scientific sociology?
- 2. How does Weber differ from Durkheim and Marx?
- 3. Can sociology be scientific? What is your view?
- 1. What are the three components of class according to Weber?
- 2. Compare and contrast the Marxist and the Weberian views of social class.
- 1. In what ways is Weber's view of class similar to Marx's?
- 2. How does Weber's use of status and party help explain social fragmentation and increasing social diversity?
- 3. How does Weber's approach help explain wider social divisions in society?
- What is feminism?
- 2. Why is there more than one form of feminism?
- 3. How is feminist research carried out?
- 4. Should research be value free and objective?

- 1. How does Marxist feminism account for inequality?
- 2. How does radical feminism account for inequality?
- 3. How do post modern feminists challenge traditional feminism?
- 4. Are women the victims of gender inequality in our society?
- What is modernism?
- 2. What is postmodernism?
- 3. What are the characteristics of post-modern society according to Lyotard?
- 1. What is social exclusion?
- 2. How does the government intend to tackle social exclusion?
- 3. Which sociologist is associated with the notion of the third way?
- 4. What criticisms have been made of the notion of the third way and social exclusion?

Outline and evaluate Marxist explanations of social inequality.

Essay Plan

| |
|---|
| Explain theory, concepts, issues or key debates. Say what you mean by key terms. Indicate probable conclusion |
| Strength 1 of theory explained |
| Strength 2 of theory explained |
| Strength 3 of theory explained |
| However |
| Weakness 1 of theory explained |
| Weakness 2 of theory explained |
| Weakness 3 of theory explained |
| Wrap the essay into a final conclusion related to the command that was given |

Research Methods

As an A level Sociologist, you have been to discover the perceptions of young men and women towards feminism in the early part of the C21st.

Suggest a simple research design and justify your choices. Explain the difficulties that you might experience in carrying out your design and suggest how you would avoid them

| The design | The justification | The problems |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Operationalise key terms | | |
| Select the method | | |
| Ethical considerations | | |
| Sample population and procedure | | |
| Pilot study | | |
| Process of research | | |
| Analysis of results | | |