1.5 Structure and Action: 30-minute Pack

AQA 8192 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Where a question refers to Item G, use both the Item and your own knowledge of the structure and action debate in your answer.

1 Evaluate the view that individual behaviour is best explained by social structure rather than by individual choice and action. In your answer you should refer to sociologists' views on both sides of the debate.

(Total for Question 1 is 12 marks)

2 Explain one strength of an action (agency) based explanation of behaviour.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

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3 The functionalist sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that society is made up of 'social facts'. Explain what Durkheim meant by 'social facts'.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

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4 Sociologists who emphasise 'structure' argue that a person's behaviour is largely shaped by forces outside their control.

(a) Give one example of a structural force that might shape a person's life choices. **(2)**

(b) Explain briefly why a strongly structural view can be criticised for underestimating individual choice. **(2)**

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

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5 Max Weber offered a different starting point, focused on individual social action and its meaning. Explain Weber's view of social action and verstehen.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

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Mark scheme · 1.5 Structure and Action: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

Level 4 A detailed, well-balanced evaluation that accurately explains BOTH a structural view (e.g. Durkheim's social facts) AND an action/agency view (e.g. Weber's social action, or a critique such as Wrong's), supported by accurate reference to named sociologists. Giddens' attempt to reconcile the two is used to add nuance. Strengths and weaknesses of each side are analysed, and a reasoned, supported judgement is reached. Sociological terminology is used accurately and consistently throughout. **10-12**

Level 3 A clear evaluation that explains both a structural view and an action/agency view, with some accurate reference to sociologists. Some analysis of strengths/weaknesses. An attempt at a conclusion, which may be only partly supported. **7-9**

Level 2 Some relevant explanation of a structural and/or an action view, with limited development or accuracy. Little clear evaluation or comparison. **4-6**

Level 1 One or two isolated, undeveloped points about structure or individual choice, with little or no sociological terminology or accurate detail. **1-3**

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Indicative content:

- Structural case: Durkheim argued society consists of 'social facts' that are external to the individual and exert real constraint, e.g. laws, shared moral rules and family expectations such as those on Amara in Item G.
- Action/agency case: Weber argued sociology should study individual social action and its subjective meaning (verstehen), and Amara's choice to study engineering despite family tradition could be cited as evidence individual meaning-making shapes outcomes as much as structure.
- Critique of the structural view: Dennis Wrong (1961) argued strongly structural theories can present an 'oversocialised' view of human beings, underestimating people's ability to reflect on and resist social expectations.
- Critique of the action view: a purely action-based account can struggle to explain why some structural patterns (e.g. patterns of family occupation, or wider patterns of class and gender) recur so consistently across many different individuals, if choice is really unconstrained.
- Giddens' reconciliation: structuration theory argues structure and action form a 'duality', with structure both constraining and enabling action, while action in turn reproduces or slowly changes structure; Amara's continuing sense of duty alongside her different career choice illustrates both processes operating together.
- A balanced conclusion could argue that neither a purely structural nor a purely action-based account fully explains behaviour on its own, and that Giddens' structuration theory offers a way of holding both insights together rather than choosing one side.
- A convincing top-level answer uses Item G as a worked example to show how structure and agency can both be seen operating in a single, real-feeling case, rather than treating the debate only in the abstract.

Question 2

identifies a genuine strength, e.g. it can explain why individuals from similar backgrounds sometimes make very different choices, which a purely structural account struggles to explain **B1**

development, e.g. it takes individual meaning and motivation seriously rather than treating people only as products of their circumstances **B1**

Answer: An action-based explanation can explain why individuals from similar backgrounds sometimes make very different choices, taking individual meaning and motivation seriously rather than treating people only as products of their circumstances.

Question 3

identifies that Durkheim used the term 'social facts' to describe ways of thinking, feeling and acting that exist outside the individual **B1**

explains that social facts are external to any one person, e.g. laws, customs and shared moral rules existed before the individual was born and will continue after they die **B1**

explains that social facts are constraining, meaning they exert real pressure on individuals to behave in particular ways, whether or not the individual is aware of it **B1**

development, e.g. Durkheim argued this shows society is more than just the sum of individual choices, and should be studied as a reality of its own **B1**

Answer: Durkheim's 'social facts' are ways of thinking, feeling and acting, such as laws and shared moral rules, that exist externally to the individual and constrain their behaviour, showing that society is more than the sum of individual choices and should be studied as a reality of its own.

Question 4

(a) a plausible structural example, e.g. social class, family expectations, gender norms, the education system or the economy **B1**

(a) development/explanation of how it constrains choice, e.g. limited family income restricting which universities or careers feel realistic **B1**

(a) Answer: Family income is a structural force: a family with limited income may make certain university courses or unpaid work placements feel unrealistic, whatever the individual would otherwise choose.

(b) identifies that a strongly structural view can suggest individuals have little or no real freedom to act differently from what structure predicts **B1**

(b) development, e.g. this struggles to explain why some individuals from similar backgrounds make very different choices from one another **B1**

(b) Answer: A strongly structural view can suggest individuals have little real freedom to act differently, but this struggles to explain why some people from very similar backgrounds still make very different choices from one another.

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Question 5

identifies that Weber argued sociology should focus on 'social action', behaviour to which the individual attaches a subjective meaning and which takes account of other people	**B1**
identifies the method of 'verstehen' (empathetic understanding): the sociologist tries to understand the meaning an action has for the person doing it	**B1**
development, e.g. this contrasts with an approach that simply observes external behaviour without asking what it means to the individual	**B1**
development, e.g. Weber's approach places individual meaning and choice closer to the centre of sociological explanation than a purely structural approach does	**B1**

Answer: Weber argued sociology should study 'social action', behaviour to which the individual attaches subjective meaning, using 'verstehen' (empathetic understanding) to grasp what the action means to the person doing it, placing individual meaning and choice closer to the centre of explanation than a purely structural approach.

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