



GSOC.SA5 Structure and Action

AQA 8192 · Calculators not allowed · about 75 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.

Item G: Amara and the family business

A hypothetical scenario written for this exercise, for students to apply structure/agency ideas to.

Amara grew up in a family that has run a small bakery for three generations, and most relatives expected her to join the business after school. Instead, she decided to apply to study engineering at university, a choice several relatives found surprising. She still visits the bakery every weekend to help out, and says she feels a strong sense of duty to the family even though she chose a different path.

1 Sociologists use the term 'social structure' to describe a key feature of society that shapes individual lives.

- ☐ A) The organised pattern of institutions and relationships that shapes people's lives
- ☐ B) A single person's individual opinion about society
- ☐ C) A type of building found only in cities
- ☐ D) A method used only in laboratory science

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 The functionalist sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that society is made up of 'social facts'.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 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 3 is 4 marks)

4 Max Weber offered a different starting point, focused on individual social action and its meaning.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 Weber identified four types of social action, based on the different reasons people act.

(a) Explain what is meant by 'traditional' action, giving an example. (2)

(b) Explain what is meant by 'instrumentally-rational' action, giving an example. (2)

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

- 6** The American sociologist Dennis Wrong (1961) criticised sociology for often presenting an 'oversocialised' view of human beings.

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

- 7** Anthony Giddens tried to move beyond a simple choice between structure and action.

(Total for Question 7 is 6 marks)

- 8** Look again at Item G. Amara grew up in a family that expected her to join the bakery after three generations, but she chose to study engineering instead.
Using Item G, explain how Amara's decision could be used as evidence for the importance of individual agency.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

- 9** Look again at Item G. Amara still visits the bakery every weekend and says she feels a strong sense of duty to the family, even though she chose a different career.
- Using Item G and Giddens' idea of the 'duality of structure', explain why Amara's story shows both structure and agency at work.

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

- 10** Some sociologists argue behaviour is mainly shaped by social structure, while others argue individual action and choice matter more.
- 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 10 is 12 marks)

11 For each statement below, state whether it best reflects a structural or an action (agency) view of behaviour.

(a) Society consists of social facts that exist externally to the individual and constrain behaviour. **(1)**

(b) Sociologists should try to understand the subjective meaning an individual attaches to their own behaviour. **(1)**

(c) Structure both constrains and enables action, and is itself reproduced by individuals' everyday actions. **(1)**

(Total for Question 11 is 3 marks)

12 Explain one strength of a purely structural explanation of behaviour.

(Total for Question 12 is 2 marks)

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

(Total for Question 13 is 2 marks)

14 Explain why the structure-and-action debate matters for how sociologists explain social change.

(Total for Question 14 is 2 marks)

Mark scheme · GSOC.SA5 Structure and Action

Question 1

- **B1** A (the organised pattern of institutions and relationships)
- **Answer: A**

Question 2

- **B1** 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
- **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 3

- (a) **B1** a plausible structural example, e.g. social class, family expectations, gender norms, the education system or the economy
- (a) **B1** development/explanation of how it constrains choice, e.g. limited family income restricting which universities or careers feel realistic
- (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) **B1** identifies that a strongly structural view can suggest individuals have little or no real freedom to act differently from what structure predicts
- (b) **B1** development, e.g. this struggles to explain why some individuals from similar backgrounds make very different choices from one another
- (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.**

Question 4

- **B1** 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
- **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.**

Question 5

- (a) **B1** identifies that traditional action is action guided by long-established custom or habit, done because 'it has always been done that way'
- (a) **B1** a correct example, e.g. following a family religious custom, or a traditional greeting
- **(a) Answer: Traditional action is guided by long-established custom or habit, done because it has always been done that way, e.g. following a family religious custom.**
- (b) **B1** identifies that instrumentally-rational action is action chosen deliberately as the most efficient means to achieve a clear goal
- (b) **B1** a correct example, e.g. choosing the fastest route to work, or comparing prices before making a purchase
- **(b) Answer: Instrumentally-rational action is chosen deliberately as the most efficient means to a clear goal, e.g. comparing prices carefully before making a purchase.**

Question 6

- **B1** identifies that Wrong argued some sociological theories treat individuals as if they simply absorb society's norms and values without question, leaving little room for independent thought or resistance
- **B1** development, e.g. Wrong argued this 'oversocialised' picture underestimates that people can and do reflect on, question or resist social expectations
- **B1** explains that Wrong's argument was aimed particularly at strongly structural, consensus-based accounts of socialisation
- **B1** development, e.g. this criticism helped encourage more attention to individual agency and social action within sociology
- **Answer: Wrong (1961) argued that an 'oversocialised' view treats individuals as if they simply absorb social norms without question, underestimating that people can reflect on, question or resist social expectations; this criticism, aimed at strongly structural accounts, encouraged more attention to individual agency.**

Question 7

- **B1** identifies that Giddens developed 'structuration theory' to explain the relationship between structure and individual action
- **B1** explains the 'duality of structure': structure both constrains and enables individual action, rather than only limiting it
- **B1** explains that, in turn, individuals' actions reproduce or gradually change social structure over time
- **B1** development, e.g. an example such as language: grammar rules constrain how a sentence can be formed, but every time people speak they also reproduce (and can slowly change) the language
- **B1** development, e.g. Giddens therefore rejected the idea that structure and agency are opposites, seeing them instead as two sides of the same ongoing social process
- **B1** correct source attribution, e.g. reference to The Constitution of Society (1984)
- **Answer: Giddens' structuration theory argues structure and action form a 'duality': structure constrains and enables individual action, while individuals' actions reproduce or gradually change that structure over time, illustrated by language, whose grammar constrains speech but is also reproduced and slowly changed by every speaker (The Constitution of Society, 1984).**

Question 8

- **B1** correctly identifies agency as a person's own capacity to make choices, distinct from simply following structural expectations
- **B1** applies this to Item G, e.g. despite three generations of family expectation, Amara chose a different path (engineering)
- **B1** development, e.g. this shows that structural pressure (family tradition) does not fully determine individual behaviour
- **B1** clear, accurate use of agency-related terminology
- **Answer: Amara's decision to study engineering despite three generations of family expectation to join the bakery shows that structural pressure does not fully determine behaviour, supporting the importance of individual agency and choice.**

Question 9

- **B1** identifies that Amara's choice of career shows individual agency, as established in Q8
- **B1** identifies that her continued sense of duty and weekend involvement shows the structural pull of family tradition has not disappeared
- **B1** development, e.g. this fits Giddens' duality of structure: structure (family tradition) still shapes and partly constrains her, while her agency (choosing engineering) shows she is not simply determined by it
- **B1** clear, accurate use of structuration terminology (duality of structure, constrains and enables)
- **Answer: Amara's choice of engineering shows individual agency, while her continued sense of duty and weekend visits show the structural pull of family tradition has not disappeared, fitting Giddens' duality of structure: structure still shapes her without fully determining her choices.**

Question 10

- **Level 4** (10-12): 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.
- **Level 3** (7-9): 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.
- **Level 2** (4-6): Some relevant explanation of a structural and/or an action view, with limited development or accuracy. Little clear evaluation or comparison.
- **Level 1** (1-3): One or two isolated, undeveloped points about structure or individual choice, with little or no sociological terminology or accurate detail.
- **Level 0** (0): No relevant content.
- **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 11

- (a) **B1** structural
- (a) **Answer: Structural**
- (b) **B1** action
- (b) **Answer: Action (agency)**
- (c) **B1** both
- (c) **Answer: Both (Giddens' duality of structure)**

Question 12

- **B1** identifies a genuine strength, e.g. it can explain consistent, large-scale patterns that recur across many different individuals, such as patterns linked to class or family background
- **B1** development, e.g. this makes it useful for explaining why inequality tends to persist across generations, rather than treating each individual case as random
- **Answer: A structural explanation can explain consistent, large-scale patterns that recur across many individuals, such as patterns linked to class or family background, making it useful for explaining why inequality tends to persist across generations rather than looking random.**

Question 13

- **B1** 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
- **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 14

- **B1** identifies that a purely structural view can make social change hard to explain, since structure is presented as constraining rather than as something individuals can alter
- **B1** development, e.g. an account that includes agency, such as Giddens' structuration theory, can better explain how individuals' actions gradually change social structures over time
- **Answer: A purely structural view can make social change hard to explain, since structure is presented mainly as constraining; an account that includes agency, such as Giddens' structuration theory, can better explain how individuals' actions gradually change social structures over time.**