SST-03 Mapping Sociological Theories onto the SST Framework

While preparing a lecture, a professor places the names of several famous sociologists on a large table. Instead of grouping them by schools of thought, she arranges them according to the core mechanisms of social systems.

Some cluster around constraints, examining how institutions, norms, and economic structures shape social possibilities. Others gather around social circumstances and behaviour, studying how people interpret situations and interact with one another. Some focus on needs and the pursuit of satisfiers, exploring how motivations shape social action. Others concentrate on power, analysing how influential actors reshape constraints and control access to resources.

Suddenly the history of sociology looks less like a series of competing theories and more like a collection of insights into different parts of the same system.

Formal Description

Major sociological thinkers often focused on particular mechanisms within social systems. By mapping their ideas onto the core mechanisms of Social Systems Theory, we can see how their contributions fit into a broader framework.

Plain English Explanation

Theoretical mapping

Relating existing theories to a broader conceptual framework.
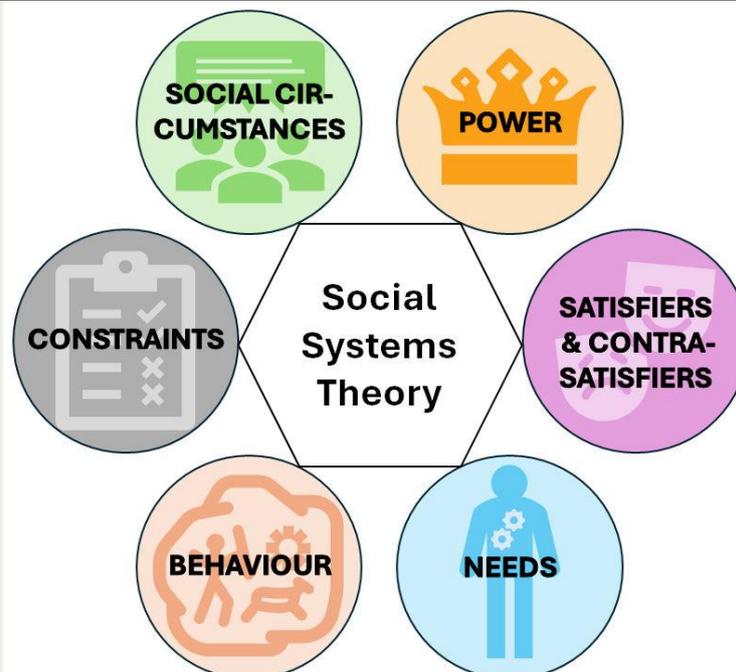
Mechanism emphasis

Different theories highlight different processes within social systems.

Different sociological traditions often focus on different parts of the same social system.

For example:

- Karl Marx examined how power and control over resources shape social structures and the distribution of satisfiers and contra-satisfiers.
- Émile Durkheim studied how social constraints, such as norms and institutions, regulate behaviour.
- Max Weber explored how cultural meanings and legitimacy influence both constraints and behaviour.
- George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman focused on how people interpret situations and interact within social circumstances.
- Pierre Bourdieu analysed how individuals develop patterned forms of behaviour within structured social environments.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal different mechanisms operating within the same broader system of social dynamics.

Examples

Conflict theories emphasise power and inequality, while symbolic interactionism emphasises everyday social interactions. Both perspectives illuminate important aspects of social life and can be understood as focusing on different mechanisms within the same system.

Provenance and Links

This module draws on ideas from:

- general systems theory
- sociological systems approaches
- complexity science
- morphogenetic social theory.

Practical Exercise

Choose a sociological theory you have encountered before or can research online.

Which of the six mechanisms does it emphasise most strongly?