

# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Theoretical explanations in relation to health and illness

There are a number of theories which explain health and illness. Students should:

- know and understand them all (AO1).
- be able to interpret and apply relevant material (AO2).
- evaluate them all (AO3).

At A Level, AO3 attracts the most marks, therefore it is extremely important that students understand the importance of evaluation.

Evaluation may be positive or negative but should be sustained throughout essays. Questions will ask for evaluation, discussion, assessment or any other term which specifically asks for ideas/theories/explanations or views to be considered.

For further detail regarding AO3 see Section 7 below.

The following sections offer an approach to understanding the theories associated with health and disability.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Section one – health and illness

Before evaluating theoretical explanations of health and illness learners should be reminded of the definitions of health (see unit one).

‘A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’.

Using the [interactive resource](#), discuss whether you think a person with any of the things named or doing any of the things named could be seen as ill or not.

Symptom/s	Ill	Not ill	Maybe
Someone with lung cancer.			
Someone who has cut their finger whilst cooking.			
A student with a hangover.			
An alcoholic.			
Someone with a migraine.			
Someone talking to themselves whilst shopping in a supermarket.			
A pregnant woman.			
An older person who is occasionally forgetful.			
Someone who is overweight.			
Someone addicted to gambling.			

## Section 2 - Functionalist

Using the interactive resource and the information below to understand the functionalist theory.

Functionalist explanation.

An essential starting point as far as functionalism is concerned is the work of Parsons.

Parsons argued that people who are or who become sick have certain rights and obligations. He argued that being sick was to be deviant and that what society needs to be fully functioning is a healthy population. He argued that society needed regulations and people, doctors, who could exercise some control over those who become sick in order to prevent people from withdrawing from their social roles.

He argued that the rights and obligations people have are inextricably linked.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

**Task 1: Using the functionalist explanation as a starting point discuss what rights do you think a person who is sick may have?**

Responses should include:

Parsons argued that a person who is sick has two rights:

1. They have the right not to work and not to carry out their normal social activities.
2. They have the right to seek help from a medical professional and not to be blamed for their illness.

Once a person becomes ill they also have obligations.

**Task 2: What obligations do you think they might have?**

Responses should include:

1. To seek medical advice in order to get better as soon as possible and therefore be able to return to their normal social roles such as work.
2. To follow the advice given in order to try to get better.

Parsons argued that unless the person who is sick agrees to do the above their sickness may not be taken seriously, it may not be legitimated.

**Task 3: Analyse the document 'Criticisms of Parson's'**

Learners should begin to be able to discuss different perspectives on functionalism.

This model really only applies to acute illnesses. Someone who has a long term condition such as MS may want to be well but is unable to get better.

In addition to going to a doctor is also dependent on class ethnicity and gender – see Unit 7.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Section 3 – Marxist

Using the interactive resource and the information below to understand the Marxist theory

### Marxist explanations

Like functionalism Marxism is also a structural explanation of society.

Marxists argue that the NHS, free at the point of access, is good for all members of society, both those who are ill and employers who need a healthy workforce.

Marxists focus on a number of aspects of health

### The NHS



Harry Leslie Smith, Dan Kitwood / getty images

Harry Leslie Smith born in 1923

[Watch the youtube extract](#)

**Task 1: In which ways does Harry Smith argue the NHS is good for everyone?**

Responses should include:

Some Marxists argue, as Harry Smith does, that the NHS was a victory for the working class. For the first time they could go to the doctors without worrying about how to pay for a visit to the GP or for paying for treatment. It would eradicate health inequalities.

However it clearly has not – see Units 5 and 7.

**Task 2: Discuss the contradiction Doyal identifies as between providing free health care and the needs of capitalism to make profit.**

Learners to read Doyal article.

Some criticisms of the Marxist view.

Go back to the extract from Harry Smith. He clearly argues that for all its faults the NHS was of huge benefit

# Theories - Teacher Notes

to people particularly the working class. Although when it was first set up in the 1940s there was an uptake of services by the middle class such that Tudor-Hart (1971) and Le Grand (1971) both said there was an inverse care law that is those with the greatest need tended to get less than those with less need.

Functionalist argue, poverty and ill health is partly to do with the lifestyle people adopt. See Unit 5 - Cultural explanations of ill health.

Postmodernists argue Marxist is a metatheory and no one grand theory can explain the way society works. There are a number of competing theories. See Section 6.

Feminists argue there is little attention paid to gender in the Marxist analysis of health and disability. See Section 5.

Interactionists argue that it does not address the meanings and motives that people attach to the actions of themselves and others for example as exemplified in the doctor-patient relationship. See Section 4.

## Section 4 – Interactionist

Using the interactive resource and the information below to understand the interactionist theory

### Interactionist explanations

Interactionists are interested in the way that individuals shape society. They are interested in the meanings that people attach to their actions and to the actions of others. As far as health and disability is concerned this means they are interested in the ways in which doctors and patients interact. In terms of this interaction they are interested in the ways in which doctors attempt to impose their views onto patients and conversely the ways in which patients might at times resist the diagnosis and advice they are being given. They are also interested in ways in which patients try to get doctors to listen to them.

Most of the research by interactionists in the field of health and disability has been small scale qualitative research much of which has been focussed on the doctor patient relationship.

A key aspect of interactionism is labelling.

**Task 1: In what ways could you apply labelling theory to health and disability?**

Write a detailed paragraph and identify relevant names.

Responses should include:

Labelling may occur when a patient is diagnosed or it may be by friends and family. Although people may attempt to resist the label it is often difficult particularly when an illness is stigmatised. Link to the work of Goffman.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

Look up the work of Rosenhan et al regarding the difficulty of resisting labelling once admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Also watch 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'.

Patients admitted to general wards who try to resist the hospital regime may also find themselves labelled as 'non-compliant'.

**Task 2: Using the following references, understand their views on health and illness**

Becker – labelling theory.

Goffman – stigma and stigmatisation of disability.

Scambler – research on women and their visits to the doctor.

Tesh – research on RSI and the differing interpretations of RSI by employers, unions and psychiatrists/doctors.

Interactionists are also interested in the ways in which morbidity and mortality statistics are socially constructed.

Extension task

**Task 3: How do you think statistics on health might be socially constructed? In what ways might a patient contribute to the social construction of morbidity statistics?**

Further considerations:

Some criticisms of interactionism

1. Giddens (1991) argues that people exercise agency but within social constraints for example a person may choose to go to the doctor but cutbacks in the system may mean they cannot get an appointment.
2. People do not always live up to the label they are given. The self-fulfilling prophecy does not always follow from labelling.
3. The research that interactionists do in the area of health and disability is qualitative and very small scale and it is therefore not safe to make generalisations from the results.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Section 5 – Feminist

Using the interactive resource and the information below to understand the feminist theory

### Feminist explanations

There are a number of feminists who work in the field of health and disability.

Three in particular are liberal feminists, Marxist feminists and radical feminists.

These all have a distinctive explanation of health and disability. It is important that they are not all 'lumped' together and a distinction is made between at least some of them. There are some general key concepts which you should be familiar with:

**Task 1: Link the following to a sociologist:**

Patriarchy, social control, the body, gender relations, the gendered nature of power, medicalisation, women as carers.

**Task 2: Evaluate the document on feminists and synthesis the information, including the key points, key concepts and key sociologists for each one.**

*(This could be in the form of a posters)*

Evaluate feminist explanations of health and illness

[40]

Go to the sample assessment materials to look at the generic mark scheme first. Consider what you need to do to access the top mark bands.

Use the guidelines for writing an essay in section seven below.

Once you have written the essay high-light the evaluative words you have used, then underline relevant sociologists and concepts you have used.

# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Section 6 – Postmodernism

Using the interactive resource and the information below to understand the postmodernism theory

### Postmodern explanations

Postmodernists argue it is not possible to explain health and disability with metatheories such as functionalism or Marxism.

They argue that the bio-medical model of health cannot explain all causes of ill health and disability. Foucault for example said there is no objective reality or truth.

Postmodernists argue that complementary medicines can legitimately exist alongside the bio-medical model. Two or more explanations which compete. They argue that doctors generally support the bio-medical view of health and illness but this can be challenged by alternative treatments and also by patients who may have more knowledge about their condition than some doctors for example people with ME.

**Task 1: List as many complementary treatments as you can**



# Theories - Teacher Notes

## Section 7 – Essay writing

(AO3) In order to be able to:

- evaluate
- discuss
- assess

learners need detailed knowledge and understanding of the different theories/explanations, together with a clear understanding of how to structure an essay.

Use the document 'Essay Writing' when formulating extended writing questions.

## Section 8 – Revision

**Task1:** Make some concept cards and some cards with key sociologists from across the range of theories. In order not to overwhelm yourself start with 20 of each and then when you are secure with those add 20 more.

Divide the card in half using the bottom half for evaluation.

P163 of the student handbook by Holborn, M et al is a useful starting point but you will need more detail for each one.