

Outline and explain two criticisms of Interactionist approaches to understanding society (10)

One criticism of the Interactionist approach to understanding society is that as an approach to understanding society it fails to recognise the impact of social institutions and the power relationships between individuals and these institutions. Nominally a social action theory, Interactionism suggests that individuals make sense of the world through their interactions with others. This suggests that individuals are active in their processing of social interactions and find meaning in each of these interactions that they encounter. However, other sociologists, such as Marxists and Feminists would suggest that many of the interactions we face daily are influenced by our position in the class system or by our gender. For example, whilst labelling theorists suggest that interactions with teachers lead students to develop self-fulfilling prophecies of failure or success, Marxists would suggest that the student-teacher interaction is actually controlled not by the individuals involved, but by the social class hierarchy, whereby the teacher has power over the student and if the student does not conform to the teacher's will then this will lead to negative sanctions. Similarly, Feminists would suggest that women being paid less in employment is not down to the interactions between an employee and her manager, but by a patriarchal system of control that looks to keep women in subordinate positions. However, it can be argued that structural views are often too deterministic for contemporary society.

A second criticism of Interactionist approaches in understanding society are that they overstate the importance of interactions. For some Interactionists, such as Colley, they suggest that people form a self-concept of themselves through their interactions with others. This idea is what Cooley called 'the looking glass self' – we understand ourselves to be funny because people laugh with us. However, critics would suggest that individuals undertake hundreds of interactions with others in a single day and that many of these interactions barely register in the individual's subconscious. Whilst it can be argued that people react to interactions with others, it is only truly meaningful interactions that register in our subconscious and have an impact. Relationships such as those with family, friends and colleagues will have a greater impact on the

individual and these interactions can be said to be influenced by their respective social institutions (family, work etc.)