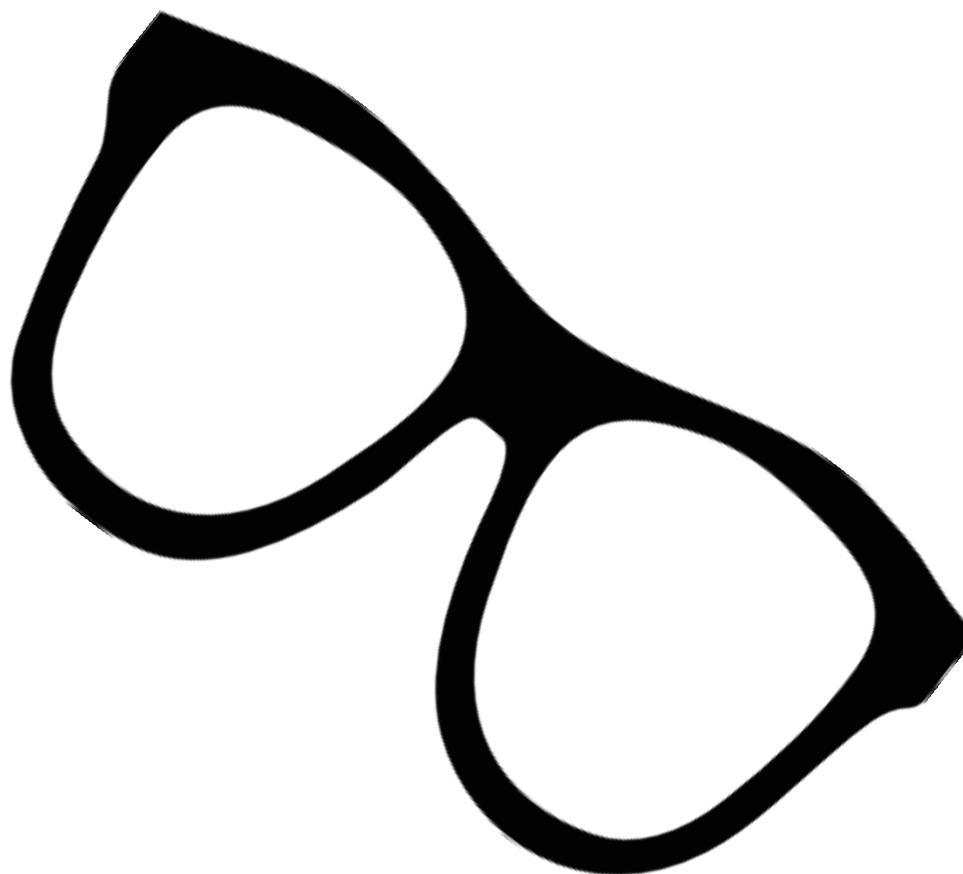


A Level Sociology



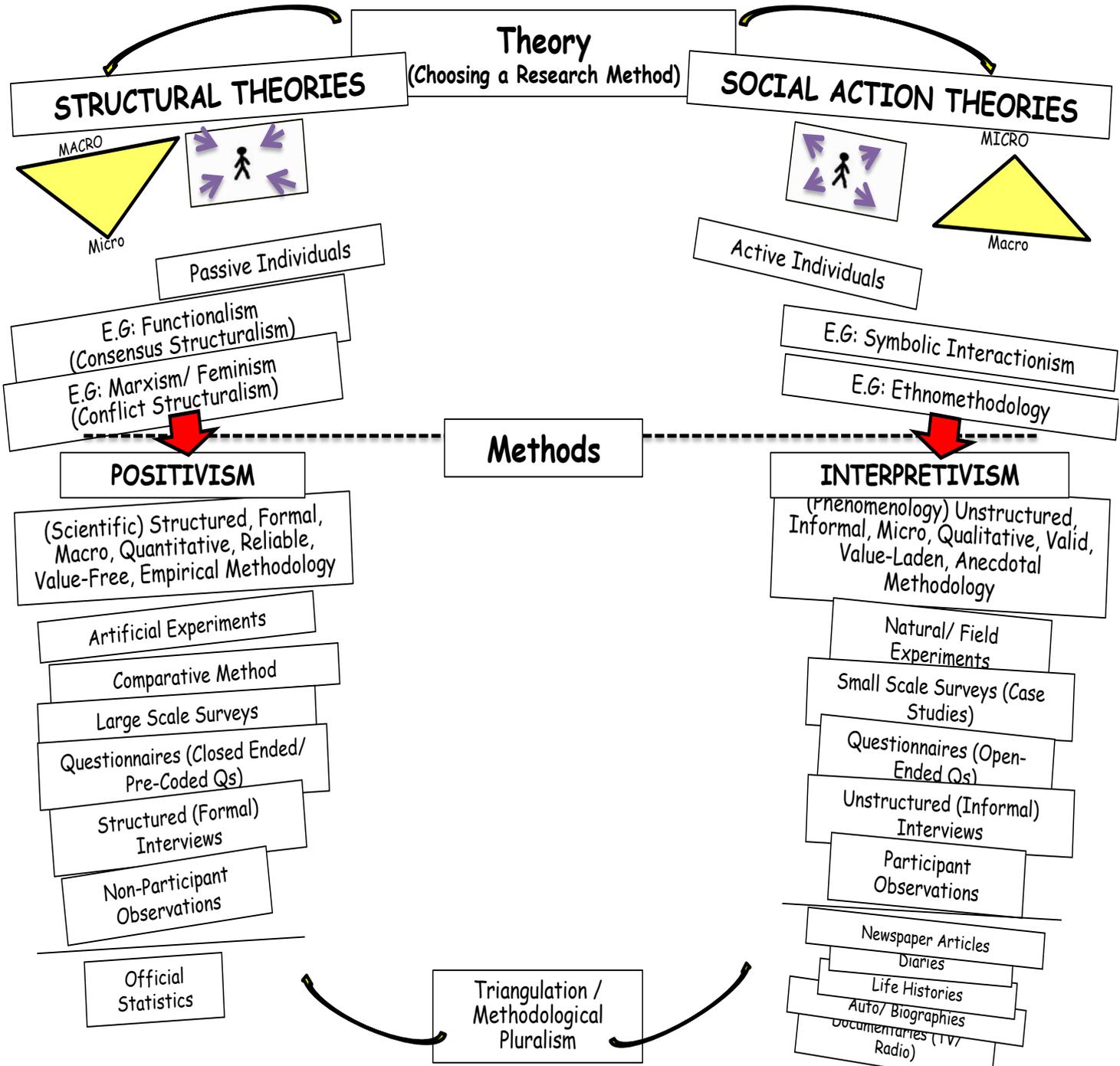
Introduction: What is Sociology?

What is Sociology?

Sociology is the *systematic study of human groups and social life*. Its primary concern is **SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS** - the various social arrangements of society. These 'social institutions' joined together constitute a '**SOCIAL STRUCTURE**' - i.e. society. It is the aim of a Sociologist to examine these 'social institutions' - Sociologists attempt to understand how they operate and how they relate to another to form modern society.

C.Wright Mills (1959) suggests Sociologists adopt a '**SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**' he suggested: "*Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.*"

Sociology: An Overview



Sociological Perspectives

A perspective is a way of looking at something; a **sociological perspective** is a way of looking at society. Each sociological perspective offers their own viewpoint on how Sociologists should examine society - each has a slight different explanation and emphasis. However, all perspectives centre on the theme of **freedom and control**: to what extent does society influence the actions of its members?

Structural Sociology

- Structural Sociology or Structuralism is concerned with the overall structure of society.

- Structural Sociology examines the way in societal institutions act as a **constraint, limit or control** on human behaviour. Thus they are seen as 'determinist'.

- Structural Sociology argues an individual's **social action** (behaviour) is **constrained/limited/controlled** by a number of **social forces** that act externally to them. These forces are the process of **socialization & societal institutions**.

- Structural Society sees human like **puppets** whose strings are pulled by society forcing them to act in a particular way.

- Structural Sociology can be seen as a **MACRO APPROACH** to Sociology. As Structural Theory examines society at large, focusing upon the investigation of societal institutions and the links between them e.g. the family and education, the economy and education.



Action Sociology

• Action Sociology or Interpretivist Sociology can be seen as contrasting to Structural Sociology. Action Sociology focuses on discovering and understanding the **interactions** between individuals and small groups.

• Action Sociology argues an individual's **social action** (behaviour) is controlled by them; individuals are '**free**' and have '**free will**'. Their behaviour is driven by the **meanings** they give to situations or the way they **see** things.

• Action Sociology can be seen as a **MICRO APPROACH** to Sociology. As Action Theory examines individuals and attempts to study, uncover and interpret meanings individuals give to their behaviour.



Structural Theory: Example 1 - Functionalism

- Functionalist Theory is an example of Structural Theory; it is especially an example of **CONSENSUS STRUCTURALISM**. The theory is associated with the work of **Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons**.
- One of the easiest ways to understand Functionalism is to explore an idea Parson's termed '**ORGANIC ANALOGY**' - the comparison of society to the human body.

Just like the human body is made of **interrelated parts**, which **function, contribute and maintain** the body; society is also made of **interrelated parts**, which **function, contribute and maintain** the social world.

Each organ has a specific responsibility - each institution also has a specific responsibility.

In order to understand the body, Doctors must understand the **function or purpose** of each organ. Functionalism argues to understand society; Sociologists need to understand the **function or purpose** of each societal institution.

Again, just like the body, society has certain needs or requirements that must be met for it to survive - Functionalists call these needs '**FUNCTIONAL PREREQUISITES**'

- Societal institutions work together to meet the 'functional prerequisites' of society by working together they cause **stability** in society and have a **positive benefit**. For example, the family ensure children are socialized into the common norms and values of wider society - these shared norms and values Functionalists term **'VALUE CONSENSUS'**.



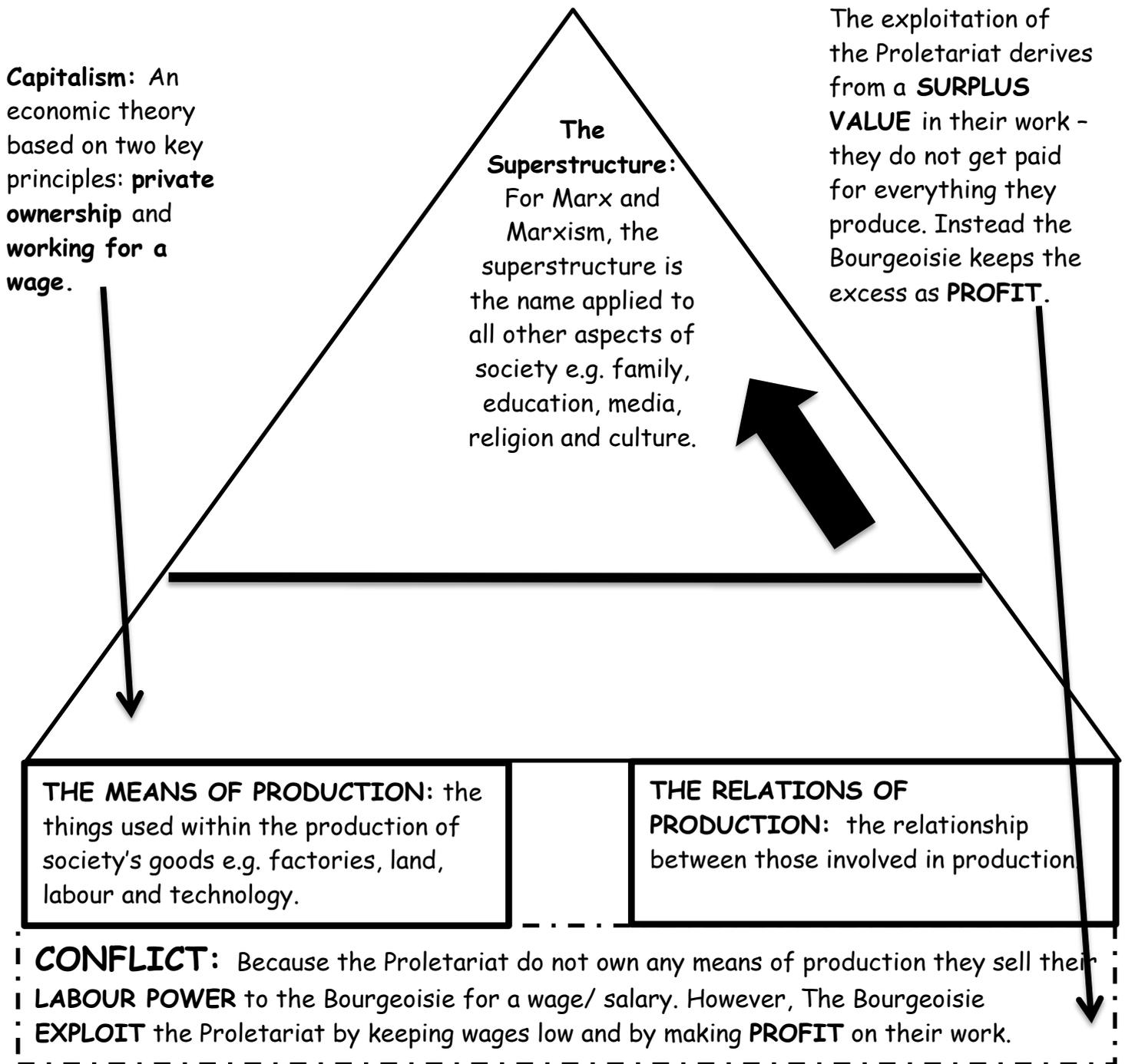
In the same way that the skin holds the human body, so too do norms and values bind society together



Structural Theory: Example 2 - Marxism

- Marxist Theory is also an example of Structural Theory; moreover, it is an example of **CONFLICT STRUCTURALISM**. The theory is associated primarily with the work of **KARL MARX**.
- The essential idea behind Marxism is that society is in a state of '**CONFLICT**.' This conflict is based on '**CLASS**' and is between those who have power and those who do not.
- Those in power for Marxists are called '**THE RULING CLASS**' or '**BOURGEOISIE**.' Those who are not in power and are powerless; Marxists call, '**THE WORKING CLASS**' or '**PROLETARIAT**.'

- Marxist see those who 'have' (i.e. the Bourgeoisie) in conflict with the 'haves-nots' (i.e. the Proletariat). This conflict Marxists argue is due to the **exploitation of the Proletariat by the Bourgeoisie**. This exploitative relationship Marxists argue, stems from **unequal power** within the economic base.



- This conflict between the R/C and the W/C for Marx affects every aspect of life - the '**economic base**' affects the '**superstructure**' - the economic base is the name given to institutions that make up society by Marxists. Marxist called this process '**HISTORICAL MATERIALISM**'

How does the economic base affect the superstructure?

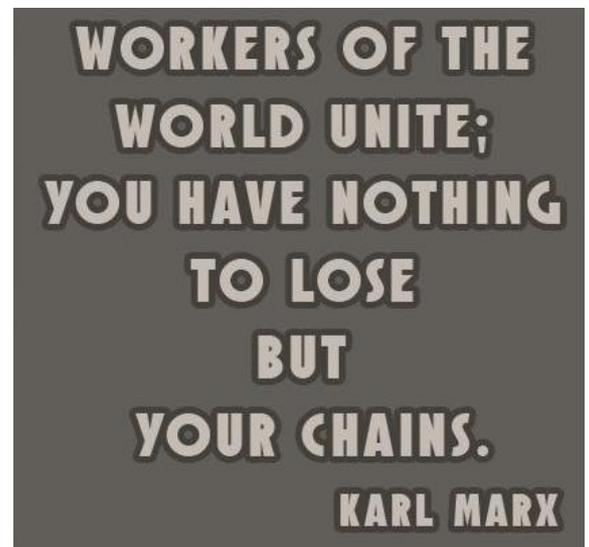
If there is conflict between those who own and run businesses and those who work in them - how does capitalism and society keep functioning?

- Marx argues this is the function of the '**superstructure.**' Later Marxists or '**Neo-Marxists**' have expanded upon Marx's original ideas to explain this process.
- For example, one Neo-Marxist **Althusser** suggests the superstructure is used by the R/C to ensure the continuation of society in two ways: through '**REPRESSION**' and '**IDEOLOGY.**' Thus, for **Althusser**, the superstructure can be seen as two distinct parts:

THE REPRESSIVE STATE APPARATUS: Institutions within society that suppress and control the W/C through **force** e.g. the army and the police.

THE IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS: Institutions within society that suppress and control the W/C through **manipulating and conditioning the way they think** e.g. the media, education and religion.

- Additionally, the Neo-Marxist **Gramsci** also highlighted the influence of the superstructure, he argued it played an important role in **legitimizing** the R/C control and power through spreading the '**DOMINANT OR RULING CLASS IDEOLOGY**' - these are ideas that make the position of the W/C seem natural, normal and essential, this ensures they will continue to work.
- The W/C never know the true extent to which they are being exploited because of the power and influence of the R/C ideology - it is constantly being reinforced through societal institutions e.g. the mass media, religion and education. Marxists argue the W/C therefore suffer from a '**FALSE CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**' - consistently being brainwashed and manipulated.
- Marx predicted this conflict would one day lead to a **REVOLUTION** - the W/C would overthrow the R/C as they would develop a '**CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**'. The means of production would be shared equally and society would be one founded on the values of '**COMMUNISM**'.



Structural Theory: Example 3 - Feminism

- Feminist Theory is an example of Structural Theory; it is again especially an example of **CONFLICT STRUCTURALISM**. The theory is not associated with one particular Feminist; instead there are a collection of theories with similar and interrelated ideas that make up the theory of 'Feminism.'

- As with Marxism, Feminists argue society is founded upon the idea of conflict, however, instead of social class, this conflict is between '**GENDER**' **MALE & FEMALE**.
- Feminists often argue 'mainstream Sociology' has been focused on the concerns of men and has failed to examine and investigate the concerns, interests and unequal position of women within society.

Feminism

an examination of society from the perspective of women. Centered on the idea that women are disadvantaged and their interests are ignored in society.

Radical Feminism

Focuses its study on the idea of **patriarchy** - **male dominance** and how this affects the position of women.

Liberal Feminism

Focuses its study on the **rights of women** and removal of discrimination and the advancing of equal opportunities e.g. changes in law/policy.

Marxist Feminism

Focuses its study on the **double exploitation** of women - both at work and at home. Adopt a Marxist perspective.

Action Theory: Example 1 - Symbolic Interactionism

- Symbolic Interactionism is an example of Action Theory/ Interpretivist Sociology. The theory is primarily associated with the work of **George Mead**.
- The theory focuses upon an understanding of **face-face situations** and how individuals define and classify situations.
- A key idea associated with Symbolic Interactionism is 'labeling' - this refers to the defining of a person or groups in a certain way

The Middle Way: Structuration Theory

- Some Sociologists e.g. **Giddens** reject this rigid dichotomy between 'structure' and 'action' theory. They argue in real life society is to be understood using a mixture of both perspectives.

Theory: Why Bother?

- Postmodernism is an approach to sociology that argues that society is changing so quickly it is in a state of **chaos, uncertainty and risk**. Social structures are breaking down and constantly changing.
- Postmodernists suggest society and social structures have ceased to exist, they have been replaced by **individual choice** free from traditional constraints e.g. gender, class, ethnicity. Individuals are seen as **consumers** making their own choice, they '**pick 'n' mix**' features of society (both locally and globally) they like and use these to form their own identity.
- Postmodernism rejects the ideas of theories or what they call '**metanarratives**' which attempt to explain society, there is no single true story, society is changing so quickly that it cannot be explained.

Tasks:

1. Research each theory and add to your knowledge.

2. Create a mind map/flashcards for each theory.

It needs to include:

- Key beliefs
- Key thinkers
- Criticisms

3. Write an extended answer explaining which theory you agree with the most and why. Compare to other theories when evaluating.