Understanding Theory

Kathleen S. Lowney

What Is Theory?

Children often will try on another person’s glasses. Sometimes they will see worse—things look out of focus and fuzzy—but other times, they will see better. Imagining theory as a pair of glasses that we put on to look at the social world can be a helpful metaphor. Theory can help us see some social patterns more clearly, while obscuring others.

Theories help us to notice and make sense of social patterns in society. Theories, therefore, are tools for understanding people’s lives and how society works. A theory is created by one or a small number of sociologists working together; it attempts to explain a particular aspect of the social structure or a kind of social interaction between individuals.

When sociology was first created as a separate academic discipline in Western Europe, it primarily revolved around famous scholars, such as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. In the mid-twentieth century, the focus shifted to the United States and to creating “families of theories.” These “families” are what sociologists call theoretical perspectives, groups of theories that share certain common ways of “seeing” how society works. This chapter focuses on the three main theoretical perspectives in sociology—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction—and how each of them “sees” or explains the social world.

Check Your Understanding

• What is theory?
• What is the difference between a theory and a theoretical perspective?

Understanding the Structural Functionalist Perspective

The view of modern societies as consisting of interdependent parts working together for the good of the whole is known as structural functionalism. Individuals work for the larger society’s
Understanding the Structural Functionalist Perspective

How I Got Active in Sociology

Kathleen S. Lowney

I went to college knowing that I wanted to study religion. But then I took Introduction to Sociology—799 other students and I (yes, the course was 800 students)—and I was hooked. Learning about structure, agency, and sociological theories gave me a language and intellectual framework to see the social world which I still use today. So the third day of that first quarter of college, I added sociology as another major. The questions that consume me still focus on the intersection of religion and sociology, be they about the new religion that I studied for my doctoral dissertation or for the last nineteen years when I have studied adolescent Satanism. I welcome each of you to the study of the academic discipline that I love.

Interests, rather than their own, due to social solidarity, or the moral order of society. Families, religion, education, and other institutions teach individuals to help society function smoothly.

Consider This
Every theoretical perspective has been influenced by the life experiences of those who created the perspective. Think of how you make sense of your society. Do you believe anyone can “make it” in society if they just work hard enough? Or do some have more advantages than others? How have your life experiences influenced the “glasses” you use to see the world?

Durkheim and Types of Societies

Émile Durkheim, writing in the early 1900s, examined social solidarity throughout history. In smaller, preindustrial societies, social solidarity derived from the similarity of its members, what Durkheim referred to as mechanical solidarity. Most did similar types of labor (working the land) and had similar beliefs (based on religion).

As societies evolved and as science gained predominance over religion and jobs became differentiated during the industrial era, a different type of solidarity, an organic solidarity, formed. These societies operated more like a living organism, with various parts, each specializing in only certain tasks but dependent on the others for survival (e.g., the circulatory system and the digestive system perform different functions, but if one does not do its job, the other will not survive). Durkheim argued that for a society based on organic solidarity to be “healthy” (i.e., in social harmony and in order), all the “parts” of the society had to be working well together, in an interconnected way, just as in a human body. Thus, sociologists who use this theoretical perspective tend to focus on social harmony and social order. They often overlook issues such as conflict and inequality. Instead, structural functionalists emphasize the role of the major social institutions and how they help to provide stability to society.

Social Institutions

What are social institutions? They are sets of statuses and roles focused around one central aspect of society (think of social institutions as similar to the different organ systems in a human body). A status is the position a person occupies in a particular institution. For example, you occupy the status position of college student. But you are also a son or daughter, a former high school student, and a member of many other groups. So, you have multiple status positions. A role is composed of the many behaviors that go into occupying a status. So part of your role as a college student is to come to class, on time, and be prepared.

These statuses that each individual occupies and the roles that they play come together to form the unique social structure of a group, an organization, an institution, or a society. Once the group becomes large enough, social institutions form around accomplishing the tasks central to the survival of the group. Thus, while social institutions are made up of individuals fulfilling their roles (what sociologists call the micro level of analysis, which focuses on either an individual or very small groups), social institutions are also much more than these individuals—they are societal (what sociologists refer to as the macro level of analysis, which focuses on the overall social structure.
of society, and large-scale societal forces that affect groups of people) in nature.

Structural functionalists note that there are seven primary social institutions: family, religion, economy, education, government, health care, and media. These seven institutions cover nearly all the major aspects of a modern society. Each social institution fulfills tasks on behalf of society. Structural functionalism calls these tasks functions. There are two types of functions. Let's talk about one at a time.

**Manifest Functions**

The obvious, stated reasons that a social institution exists are known as manifest functions. Structural functionalists maintain that manifest functions of each institution fulfill necessary tasks in society. For example, let's look at the social institution of the family. One function the family performs is to encourage individuals to procreate—to have children. Otherwise, a society would likely die after one generation, wouldn't it? So a manifest function of the family institution in any society is reproduction. But institutions can have more than one manifest function. Families are also responsible for raising and instructing their children. In particular, families teach the children the cultural norms and values of their particular society, a process known as socialization.

Consider education as a social institution. What tasks does the education institution do for society? It teaches those in school the knowledge that society says is important to know in order to be a contributing adult member of that society. In the United States today, that includes grammar, spelling, mathematics, U.S. and world history, and many basic computer skills.

**Latent Functions**

Manifest functions are only the first type of function that structural functionalists use to examine the social world. They also use latent functions. Latent functions are good or useful things that a social institution does but are not the institution's reason for existing.

Let's return to the family institution for a moment. We know that its manifest function is to reproduce and then socialize children, so that the society can continue on indefinitely into the future. But family as a social institution supports the society in many other ways. Families help out the economic institution, for example, when they purchase food or school supplies or pay rent or buy a house. Helping the economy is a good thing, but it is not a family's core function.

**Consider This**

What might be some latent functions of the educational institution?

Latent functions almost always link to a second social institution (e.g., both family and education support the economic institution). These connections between one social institution and another build the social harmony that structural functionalists see when they look at society.

Sometimes behavioral patterns have unintended consequences, called dysfunctions. For example, the United States built the interstate highway system to move people and products more quickly from location to location, which helps the economic institution. But that good idea also led to an increase in air pollution (a dysfunction) because more people purchased cars and chose to drive, because locations were so much easier to get to and from.

**Seeing the Social World Using Structural Functionalism**

Structural functionalism is a macro-theoretical perspective. That means that its unit of analysis, the thing being examined, is society as a whole, rather than an individual or subculture. Imagine a sociologist
standing at a distance and looking at how society is working. In this case, sociologists look for social order and harmony when they put on structural functionalism’s glasses.

In looking at the big picture of society, functionalist sociologists focus less on discrete individuals and their daily lives and interactions with each other. Instead, they analyze social institutions and how they fit together to build social harmony and stability. So, for example, structural functionalists study the institution of the family, not individual families, to learn how social institutions function to meet societal needs. While particular families may not fulfill each of the functions, as a social institution, the family can and must carry out certain functions in order for society to function smoothly. By concentrating on social institutions, structural functionalism rises above the unique ways that millions of families go about their daily lives of cooking, taking out the garbage, cleaning up after each other, loving each other, raising children, and so on to focus on the vital role with which the institution of family is charged by society: to birth and then socialize children.

Using the structural functionalist lens, sociologists see that social institutions construct stability and order. In large part, this is because several institutions (e.g., family, religion, and education) have cooperated to socialize each of us into adhering to the same set of cultural norms and values. Thus, American drivers stay on the right side of the road, we stop at stop signs, we more or less follow the speed limit, and so on. We also don’t rob banks or commit murder. Put differently, most citizens of a society are “good” people who follow the social norms.

Curbing Violations of Social Norms

But what about an individual who chooses to act against those shared cultural norms? How does structural functionalism see that person? First and foremost, that person—for whatever reason—is violating social norms. Perhaps he or she was not properly socialized by parents and thus did not learn the norms of society or may have learned them but do not see the norms as being acceptable (see Chapter 6). Or, perhaps the person might simply be selfish and putting her or his needs ahead of what is best for society.

So let’s talk about a bank robber for a moment. He or she should have learned from family, teachers, and
perhaps religious leaders that robbing a bank is not socially acceptable behavior. But despite those socializing messages, the person still chose to rob a bank. The person has stepped outside of the moral order of the community and must be punished (once caught, of course). But why? Why is punishment needed? Structural functionalist theorists believe that punishment is required for at least two reasons. First, accepting one’s punishment is a step in the rehabilitation/resocialization process of the individual back into the community (if deemed possible). Second, structural functionalist theorists, building on the sociological work of Émile Durkheim, also worry that without punishment, “bad” behavior will spread like an epidemic in the community. If you were a customer in the bank and see the bank robber get a bunch of money and never get caught, then you might try to get away with something bad too. And then a third person might see you do that act of unpunished bad behavior and do something else . . . and so on. Soon, the social order will have broken down completely. So structural functionalists note the importance of punishing the deviant individual to “head off” future deviance acts—not only by that person but by others in the society who might use that person as a positive role model.

Social Change

Given this background, you can begin to predict how structural functionalist theorists view social change. What is social change? Sociologists see change happening when there are large-scale, macro, structural shifts in society or institutions within one or more societies. Functionalists, because they see harmony deriving from the stable functioning of institutions and cooperation among them, are not so sure that a lot of social change is necessarily a good thing. Change in one institution rips apart the social harmony and equilibrium between it and the other institutions and requires a long time for the other social institutions to adjust.
to “catch up” and to reestablish social equilibrium. So theorists using a structural functionalist perspective would argue that, if change is needed at all, it should be done very slowly so as not to upset the equilibrium that undergirds the society and makes it strong.

What Doesn’t Structural Functionalism See?

Can rapid social change and the disharmony that comes along with it ever be a good thing for society to experience? Structural functionalist theorists would argue that no, it wouldn’t—indeed couldn’t—be a good thing. But think about that more deeply and use your sociological imagination.

Imagine we could go back in time to America in the mid-1940s, just after World War II ended. Pick nearly any town in the United States; what was it like? Let’s just focus on one social institution—economics. Most likely, many men were just returning from fighting overseas, and many women were still in the paid workforce. During the war, more women held jobs than they had before. As the war ended, many men came back home and wanted, even needed, their jobs back. Some women wanted to go back to primarily working only in the home, but others didn’t. Of course, some—those widowed by the war, for instance—had to keep working to pay the family’s bills. Some women were upset that they were urged to leave the labor force and return home to have babies and keep house. They resented the fact that their job opportunities were limited to so few fields, such as nursing and education.

How would a functionalist evaluate this situation? While they might not support the sex discrimination clearly evident in the labor force, they would want slow, incremental change to occur, because they could see how immediate gender equality in the workplace would create upheaval in the labor force. So they might have argued for the benefits of many women returning to unpaid labor while also advocating for public discussions and education about the possible merits of changing laws and regulations that discriminated against women in the workforce.

But another way of thinking about slow, gradual social change is that it would allow continued discrimination. Structural functionalism, by focusing on the need for social order and harmony, can overlook times in the life of the society where rapid social change—even if it may lead to some social chaos—is the just thing to do.

Using Structural Functionalism to Analyze the Case of the Meitiv Family

We will now make use of the structural functionalist perspective to examine an incident that hit the news in 2015: the case of Danielle and Alexander Meitiv; their two children, Rafi, age ten, and Dvora, age six; the Montgomery, Maryland, police; and the Child Protective Services of Maryland (for more about this case, including video, check out the sources at the end of the chapter). On December 20, 2014, the Meitiv children were at a local park at 5 p.m. and started to walk the one mile back to their house, alone. Three blocks from their destination, they were stopped by the police and taken to police headquarters. Later that night, they were placed in the custody of Child Protective Services (CPS). The Meitivs did get their children back later that evening but were told that they were under investigation by CPS. Asked why they let their children walk the one mile from the park to their home, they stated that “children learn self-reliance by being allowed to make choices, build independence and progressively experience the world on their own” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 16). Almost two months
later, CPS completed its investigation, with a finding of “unsubstantiated child abuse” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 1). But the case was far from over.

Just a few months later, the parents dropped both children off at another park at 4 p.m. and told them to be home by 6 p.m. At 4:58 p.m., a man walking his dog called local police about two children who were unsupervised in the park. The man did not approach or talk with the children before placing the call. Police detained both children again, taking them immediately to CPS, where they were held without being allowed to contact their parents for a few days. Another CPS investigation was launched against their parents, questioning their ability to protect and parent their children correctly.

Why might the Meitiv parents allow their children to walk home alone? Are they just bad parents, too lazy to take proper care of them? No. The Meitivs practice what is called “free-range parenting,” a parenting philosophy that encourages parents to allow children to grow up independently, with a minimum of adult supervision, appropriate to the age of the children. Free-range parents feel that American society prevents children from learning to be truly self-sufficient.

Let’s analyze the situation at this point. From a structural functionalist perspective, the manifest functions of the family as a social institution are to reproduce and then socialize the children to accept and follow the prevailing values in society. Obviously, the Meitivs have children, so their family has met that first manifest function. Where this example gets murky is when we shift our attention to the second manifest function.

The United States as a society values individualism and independence, and therefore parents are expected to teach their children to be self-reliant and independent. The devil’s in the details, though. How should they teach them independence and at what age? Are children aged six and ten too young to be walking alone on a moderately busy street? Is it abuse or neglect if a parent teaches this particular instance of self-reliance “too soon” (i.e., at a time when many in society feel it is inappropriate)? And should parents who do so be judged “bad parents” by authorities—in this case, law enforcement and Child Protective Services?

Here’s the rest of the story. After the second instance of CPS and law enforcement involvement, the story was reported widely, and more and more individuals began to weigh in publicly, writing comments on online news articles and other social media. A social movement even sprang up after the first incident (St. George and Schulte 2015), which led, after the second incident, to a petition to change Maryland’s laws, about allowing children to be outside alone without parental supervision. Other petitions were created and sent to county officials. For their part, the Meitivs filed a lawsuit against CPS and Montgomery County’s law enforcement.

Consider This

If you were working in the Maryland Child Protective Services, tasked with helping children in need, how would you feel about the Meitivs’ parenting style? Think especially about your judgment of the parents’ choice to let their children walk home alone the second time.

This second investigation by CPS ended with “neglect ‘ruled out’” (St. George 2015a, paragraphs 1, 7), and the case was closed. A spokesperson for Maryland’s Department of Human Resources (to
which CPS reports) added that “a child playing outside or walking unsupervised does not meet the criteria for a CPS response absent specific information supporting the conclusion that the child has been harmed or is at substantial risk of harm if they continue to be unsupervised” (St. George 2015a, paragraph 10).

Notice how this case shows the interrelatedness of social institutions (e.g., family and government), which is at the core of structural functionalism. Those using a structural functionalist perspective likely would leave unquestioned the assumption that family, law enforcement, and CPS all had a duty to be concerned about children in general and the Meitiv’s two children in particular. Each agency’s duty and, therefore, their employees’ behavior were grounded in its manifest function.

Structural functionalists would likely argue that in a populous community like Montgomery County, Maryland, most parents would not allow a six-year-old to play unsupervised and walk back home at night, even in the company of a ten-year-old sibling. If this is the value consensus, then law enforcement and CPS’s decisions to take the children into custody and investigate their home life could be easily justified as correct. CPS’s initial review was meant to teach the Meitivs how to better parent their children and, simultaneously, to reinforce proper parenting behaviors to all who live in the county.

Consider This
Be a structural functionalist. What evidence in society can you find to illustrate that there is a consensus on how parents should raise children in the United States today?

Could other sociologists look at the story of what happened to the Meitiv family and reach different sociological conclusions? Let’s turn next to the other macro-sociological theoretical perspective—conflict—and look at how sociologists using that perspective see social reality. Then we’ll return to the Meitiv family as our example.

Check Your Understanding
• What do structural functionalists see as the cause of social problems? Why?
• Why do structural functionalists want social change to happen slowly?

Understanding the Conflict Theoretical Perspective

The second macro-theoretical perspective is conflict theory. The conflict perspective is rooted in the scholarship of Karl Marx, a nineteenth-century thinker. Marx studied history and economics to see how human societies grow and change. In doing so, he created a revolutionary theory of social change called economic determinism.

Karl Marx and Advanced Capitalism

Marx believed that there were ten stages of societal development but was most concerned with the last three stages. Given that, we’ll start with stage 8, advanced capitalism. Marx held that advanced capitalism is an economic system based on profit and the pursuit of maximum profit. Capitalism divides people into two major categories and a third, smaller group. There are the bourgeoisie, the rich owners of the means of production (the technology and materials needed to produce products, such as factories), and the proletariat, the poor workers (in the factories, etc.). The perpetually unemployed comprise the third group, the lumpenproletariat.

The advanced capitalism of Marx’s time was a far cry from what we know capitalism to be today in the United States. Since there were no labor laws and it was so much cheaper to hire children than adults, there were large numbers of children in the labor force. The bourgeoisie, eager to maximize profits, would hire children even if they could not completely manage the physical or intellectual tasks required on the job. There were no inspectors making sure that the workplace was safe, so many proletariat were injured. There was no worker’s compensation insurance either, so injured proletariat faced a difficult choice: show up and work despite the injury (but face the wrath of the owner for working slower) or quit work to heal—and starve. Wages were incredibly low because the bourgeoisie could use the ever-growing...
pool of lumpenproletariat as a stick over any worker who dared ask for a raise. Such a worker would be fired, as it was very easy to find a member of the lumpenproletariat who would work for the original wage (or an even lower one).

**False Consciousness**

For Marx and like-minded individuals of the time period, the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie was a bit puzzling at first. Why didn't the proletariat realize how economically exploited they were under advanced capitalism and, for instance, stop showing up for work? Surely that would bring down the capitalist system.

Marx theorized that the workers were in a state of false consciousness. They collectively and individually did not understand just how badly they were being treated; they were, he argued, misled. They believed that, if they just worked hard every day, they too might become a member of the bourgeoisie. The media of the day, the religious institution, and the political institution all promulgated this: a good worker, in time, could "strike it rich" and get in on the many advantages of capitalism. But that was not going to happen for most if not all proletariat, living on a subsistence wage while the factory owner was living in a huge home, profiting from the proletariat's hard work. Yet their false consciousness kept them from seeing the reality of their lives—as members of the proletariat, they were compelled to work on a subsistence wage while the factory owner was going to happen for most if not all proletariat, living in a huge home, profiting from the proletariat's hard work. Yet their false consciousness kept them from seeing the reality of their lives—as members of the proletariat, they were compelled to work on a factory floor, sewing button after button for sixteen hours a day, for the rest of their lives. Was this really what life should be, Marx asked?

**Species Being and Alienation**

No, it was not. The human race had what Marx called species being—the unique potential to imagine and then create what we imagine. Humans can sketch fantastically intricate designs and then make them become real in the world. No other animal can do that. But the proletariat were prevented from living up to their species being by the very nature of the capitalist exploitation they endured. They lived in a state of alienation; the proletariat were forced to give up on their creativity, their ability to imagine and then create. Instead, they were alienated from their true selves by having to work so hard for someone else, the bourgeoisie. The proletariat had no say in the structure of their workday or in the product that they created. Their monotonous jobs were small and repetitious; they often never even knew what the finished product of their labor looked like. Worse yet, they couldn't afford the products that they were making. Alienation was sapping the proletariat's species being and it was increasing.

**Karl Marx and Socialism**

Marx felt that, to move the proletariat from false consciousness to true consciousness, the proletariat had to come to grips with the depths of their exploitation by the bourgeoisie. He believed that his writing, along with others, would “wake them up” from their state of alienated false consciousness and lead them to bring about change in their society.

Marx believed that, when the proletarian revolution began, society would move from the eighth stage of societal development, advanced capitalism, into the ninth stage, socialism. This ninth stage was a sort of “working it out” stage of social change. Economically, things would be more just than under capitalism but not yet truly equal. In socialism, children would be off the factory floors and sent to free public schools while able-bodied adults would work. The state would take over the means of production from the bourgeoisie through imposing a heavy progressive income tax on all adult citizens. This tax would economically hurt only the bourgeoisie (although many in that group were expected to die in the revolution). A proletariat worker, with almost no income, would not have to pay much. This tax would ensure that rich families would no longer be able to pass money, property, and other expensive goods down to the next generation via the inheritance laws. After a bourgeoisie died, the socialist government would “inherit” the rest of their money and goods and redistribute it to the citizens.

Socialism, Marx predicted, would last a few generations. He felt that the values of capitalism, such as support for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of just a few, the acquisition of goods as a sign of high status, and so forth, would take a while to die out. It might take a generation or two with people who had grown up only under socialism as an economic system before society would be ready for the tenth stage of social development: communism.

**Consider This**

If you were alive when Marx was and you were a wealthy owner of a factory who’d been planning to pass down your wealth to your children, what would you think of Marx’s new economic system called socialism? Why? And how would you feel as a member of the proletariat?
Karl Marx and Communism

Marx’s vision of communism never became a reality, not even in nations that refer to themselves as communist. He believed that, after a few generations of socialism as an economic system, some of the key social institutions, such as the political and economic systems, would no longer be needed and would disappear. Under communism, all citizens would be equal and, at long last, able to fulfill their species being. Each person could contemplate and then go create. There would be no social classes under communism, because every person would make the same wage for work done.

All of these stages of social change are economic ones. Remember, Marx is often called an economic determinist. The social institution that was the base of the society, for him, was always the economy. He believed that, as the economy changed from advanced capitalism to socialism and ultimately to communism, the other six social institutions would necessarily change and adapt.

From Marx to the Conflict Perspective

It was in the 1960s, mostly in the United States, that Marx’s theory became the intellectual foundation for our second macro-theoretical perspective: the conflict perspective. Conflict theorists hold on to some of his theoretical insights while modifying others.

At the root of Marx’s theory is the idea that society is divided into competing classes: those who own the means of production and those who work for the owners. Conflict theorists today argue that Marx’s analysis was too narrow. Oppression does not have to be only economic in nature. Rather, modern conflict theorists recognize many ways in which social rewards are unequally distributed (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, citizenship status, age, ability/disability).

Since inequalities go beyond economic oppression, sociologists using the conflict perspective use different terms to reflect this social reality. They talk about the haves—those individuals and social institutions that gain access to more of society’s scarce rewards—and the have-nots—those who are unable to get even their fair share of social rewards, due to their category membership. Noneconomic rewards include access to political power, education, and social status or prestige.

Seeing the Social World Using the Conflict Perspective

Again, conflict is a macro-theoretical perspective; it analyzes society as a whole. But while structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see oppression: the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status.

Conflict theorists note that the haves practice value coercion, wherein they use their power over the seven major institutions to force their values onto the have-nots, as part of their effort to maintain their higher status positions in society. The media, for example, rarely tell stories about the working class. When they do, the stories often make them appear deviant—buffoonish (think Homer Simpson) or overweight (think Mama June from Toddlers and Tiaras and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, before she lost weight). Television news also participates in this value coercion, when they use racial terms to describe criminals of color but conveniently ignore race when the deviant is White (Mastro et al. 2009). Repeated over and over, these media messages socialize people into thinking that poor equals bad, or Black or Hispanic equals criminal. These messages support the skewed social structure that the haves created.

Conflict thinkers, unlike structural functionalists, do not see social problems as the result of the behavior of some “bad” individuals. Rather, they regard the inequitable distribution of resources and rewards as the cause of most social problems. Conflict theorists would ask what made the person so desperate as to commit a crime? What other opportunities to attain money do people from her social background have? Is this behavior part of a pattern due to one group in society oppressing another? For example, did the owner of the factory where she worked fire all the workers in town and ship jobs overseas?

Many conflict theorists aren’t satisfied with merely recognizing such inequalities; they go that next step and suggest ways that they and others can reduce, if not completely eliminate, the oppression that they observe. Like Marx, sociologists who take a conflict perspective advocate social change to help the have-nots in society gain more of society’s rewards. And, unlike most structural functionalists, who want social change to be slow and gradual so as not to upset the social harmony between social institutions, conflict theorists believe that social change to alleviate social injustice should be done rapidly. For conflict thinkers, slow, gradual social change is merely another term for continued oppression. They want to help the have-nots—now.
What Doesn’t Conflict See?

The conflict perspective is so laser focused on oppression and making life better for the have-nots that it can overlook moments when society is going along fairly well. By concerning itself primarily with injustices and oppression, conflict can overlook times of societal harmony and equilibrium. Moreover, conflict theorists do not always acknowledge how disruptive and harmful change can be—for the have-nots as well as the haves.

Subperspectives in Conflict Theory

The conflict perspective, while unified in the focus on oppression and efforts to combat it, has divided into subperspectives. For example, feminist conflict theorists argue that men as a category of people have greater access to social rewards than women (see Chapter 8 for more on this). Meanwhile, critical race theorists focus on the social construction of race and the White-dominated racial hierarchy (see Chapter 9). All conflict theorists, however, build on Marx’s insight that some individuals and groups have more resources and rewards than others do, and this is unjust.

Disability scholars frequently use the conflict perspective to analyze how modern Western societies create the built environment (the architecture of public and private spaces) in ways that work for the able-bodied but not for those people living with disabilities. Why, for example, cannot every entrance to a building include a ramp? Often only one entrance is “made accessible.” Notice that the language used implies that creating accessibility is an “extra,” something that must be added to a structure rather than an organic part of every building. With that kind of a mind-set, it becomes easy to see that “normal bodies” are the standard against which all others are judged. Those of us with disabilities then are somehow lesser, deviant people and less deserving of access. As you can see, the fundamental assumption of the modern conflict theoretical perspective is still rooted in Marx’s insight: the social rewards of society are not equally shared.

Using the Conflict Perspective to Understand the Meitiv Family

Now turn your attention back to the Meitiv family, who advocated free-range parenting, the way of parenting which encourages teaching children to be independent and autonomous from an early age. How might the conflict perspective analyze what happened to them? Recall the conflict perspective’s basic assumption: different categories of people get different social rewards based on their location in the social structure. In the family’s interactions with law enforcement and CPS, you can see a power imbalance right away.

An anonymous person placed a call to the police—without even talking to the children in question. Recall, an investigation had not yet occurred when the children first were detained by CPS. True, law enforcement and CPS workers were simply performing their jobs, but they represented the state and all of its power. The Meitiv parents, in contrast, had little or no power. Indeed, Alexander Meitiv had to listen to the police lecture him on the dangers of the modern world when the police finally did return the children after the first incident (St. George 2015a). Educated people (Alexander is a theoretical physicist, Danielle a climate-science consultant) discovered that they had not—at least in that moment—either the power or the freedom to decide how to raise their own offspring. And who had even less power in this situation? The children. Their feelings were ignored throughout the bureaucratic wrangling.

Now imagine the story playing out a bit differently. The family in question did not have an intact set of two parents but instead was led by a single parent. A poor, single parent. A poor, single parent of color who is working several jobs to make ends meet. Do you think that—at each step of the Meitivs’ story—that this poor single parent of color would have been treated the same way as the Meitivs were? Would he or she have gotten the kids back the night of the first “walking alone” incident? Received a decision of “unsubstantiated child abuse” after the first incident? Still gotten the kids back after the second incident of them walking alone? Not had the children taken away, given the economic stress the

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**Consider This**

What group(s) could be analyzed as the haves in the Meitivs’ situation?

Why?

Who might be the have-nots? Why?
family was under? Had enough money to sue CPS and law enforcement? In fact, might anyone have even placed the call to law enforcement at all had they seen two children of color walking alone? Or if there had been a call, might it have been less about concern for the children’s safety and more about “what are those kids up to” (i.e., someone worried about what possible criminal behavior they might be about to do)?

Consider the 2014 South Carolina case involving Debra Harrell, a forty-six-year-old African American woman, and her nine-year-old daughter, Regina. Debra worked at a McDonald’s and, lacking other childcare options, often had to bring her child with her. The girl would usually sit in the restaurant until her mother was done working, but on three days that summer, Debra allowed her child to play in a popular park nearby. On the third day, a parent of another child at the park asked Regina where her parents were. Alarmed when Regina told her that her mom was working, the parent called the police. Debra was then arrested on the charge of felony child neglect, and Regina was placed into foster care. Debra was released on $5,000.00 bail, but Regina remained in foster care for seventeen days before being returned to her mother. Debra’s arrest meant that she also lost her job (until media coverage pressured the local McDonald’s to take her back) (CBS News 2014; Friedersdorf 2014; Reese 2014).

As tense as the Meitiv situation was, their race, education levels, and social class likely buffered them from the full power of CPS and the police, whereas families living in poor neighborhoods, who are people of color and who, like Debra Harrell, cannot afford to hire a private attorney, are often denied those opportunities to quickly “fix” the situation.

Check Your Understanding
• What are manifest functions of a social institution?
• According to Marx, why are the proletariat in a state of false consciousness in advanced capitalism?
• How does a society move from advanced capitalism to socialism, according to Marx?
• Can you explain what Marx meant by communism? Think about social classes, oppression, and so on.
• What are the conceptual differences between the terms bourgeoisie and proletariat and haves and have-nots? Can you correctly use these terms?
• According to conflict theorists, what is value coercion and how do the haves use it?
Understanding the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

The macro-theoretical perspectives let sociologists see the big picture (the macro unit of analysis) of what is happening in the entire society, be it order and harmony (structural functionalism) or oppression (conflict). These theoretical lenses, however, miss something vital to the study of people in groups: interaction between individuals—the micro level. Symbolic interactionism provides that theoretical balance for sociology. As the micro-theoretical perspective, it asks questions macro perspectives do not. For example, we can use it to examine how any one person develops a sense of self—the knowledge that she or he is unique, separate from every other human, let alone from the furniture, a phone, the weather, or the book he or she is reading. It helps us study how meaning comes to be constructed and shared by a group of people. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.

The Social Construction of Reality

Interactionist theorists study how culture—the way of life of a particular group of people—comes to be created. Individuals come together around one or more shared purposes and begin to interact. This interaction, over time, becomes routinized in various ways. So, for example, when the individuals first interact, they may create a common greeting. That greeting gets repeated every time they meet and suddenly they have created a norm—an expectation about behavior. Now individuals must use this now-standardized greeting or else be judged by the group as deviant. These creators of the greeting continue to use it, further normalizing it for their group. They will then teach new members (either born into the group or converts to it) the greeting and pass it along to the next generation.

In effect, the group constructs its culture. Culture includes norms and the symbols through which we communicate (e.g., language, numbers, gestures, and the meaning we attach to objects such as a nation’s flag, a swastika, and a cross). Culture also consists of values, what we believe to be good or bad, and material objects the group creates to make life easier and meaningful. All of these are social constructions. This raises a significant sociological question: how does this socially constructed content (i.e., culture) get “inside” each person? Interactionists argue that happens through the process of socialization, the sharing of culture from generation to generation.

While socialization can happen at any time in a person’s life, the most intense time for socialization is in childhood (what we often call primary socialization), so that will be our focus. George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, the founders of the symbolic interactionist perspective, both emphasized the importance of the socialization process. You will learn more about Mead’s work in Chapter 5. In this chapter, we will focus on Cooley’s contributions. Through his “looking glass self” theory, he described how a child develops a sense of self in three steps.

The Looking Glass Self Theory

A child’s first step in developing a sense of self is to imagine how she appears to relevant others—her parents, siblings, grandparents, and so on. Cooley argued that it isn’t possible to receive direct information about how others think or feel; instead, the child tries to put herself in the shoes of the other person and then contemplates what that other person is feeling about her. So she might imagine, “I think I am loved by my parents.”

In the second step, the child reacts to the feedback the parents and others give about their perceptions toward the child. That feedback could be verbal (e.g., “I love you”) or nonverbal (e.g., holding hands, a quick hug, or a slap across the face). What is important in this step, Cooley argued, is that the child is responding to what she feels the feedback means about her. The child perceives who she is (to others—and thus to herself) via feedback from others. These others are the social mirror that the child uses to develop a sense of self.

Finally, in the third step, the child integrates the first two into a coherent and unique sense of self. Interaction with particular primary groups (small collections of people of which a person is a member, usually for life, and in which deep emotional ties develop, such as one’s family of origin) shapes the child’s sense of self. Others in effect become the “mirror” by which each person sees oneself.

While socialization in childhood is foundational, Cooley would argue that socialization continues throughout a person’s life. A new employee receives feedback from the boss and peers and integrates that feedback into a sense of self as a worker, for example.

Dramaturgical Theory

Interactionism does not just focus on the construction of the self. Erving Goffman was a sociologist who analyzed interaction between small groups as if it was a play. So Goffman looked at the social actors
(the individuals involved in the interaction), the social scripts (the interactional rules) that people use to guide the interaction, and the props (material objects) that the social actors use to enhance their performances. Think about a first date. Who should ask whom out? What are typical things to do on a first date? Who should pay for the date? The fact that you and your friends would have similar answers shows that there is a social script at work.

Often the performance involves teams of individuals, not just two people, and interactions occur in particular settings. While Goffman (1959) discussed many settings (or regions), two of the key ones are the front stage (where the interaction actually takes place) and the back stage (where one prepares for the interaction). Getting ready in your apartment or residence hall would be back stage; front stage would be where the date actually unfolds (e.g., the car, a restaurant, a movie theater, etc.).

Let’s say that an unexpected event occurs—the person who is supposed to pay forgot money (a prop). This forgetfulness immediately highlights the fact that there is a social script, which one social actor just violated. What would you do if you forgot your wallet in that situation? Maybe you would first talk to the waiter or the restaurant manager (bringing in a team member), to try to find a solution, without having to tell your date.

According to Goffman, we each try to control the vibe that we give off to others. Each of us uses presentation of self skills—shaping the physical, verbal, visual, and gestural messages that we give to others—to control evaluations of us, what Goffman called impression management. So we know to dress nicely on a first date and try not to forget our wallets.

Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis allows symbolic interactionism to move beyond the socialization process (which primarily occurs within the family) to study a wide range of interactions. For example, Cahill (1999) wrote that mortuary science students (social actors) were ostracized by other students (other social actors); they were forced to eat alone in the school cafeteria (front stage) because they were perceived as symbolically tainted by death in the eyes of students seeking other degrees. Studying death and how to embalm a body made it difficult for mortuary science students to create a presentation of self that was “normal,” no matter how much they tried.

What Doesn’t Symbolic Interactionism See?

Recall that both macro-theoretical perspectives we have discussed allow us to examine the causes of social problems, how to solve them, and the rate of social change. But symbolic interactionism cannot think about those concepts.

Social problems and social change are macrosociological concepts, but symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective. Interactionism calls the sociologist’s attention to the dynamics of interaction between individuals and small groups. For example, it could be used to study the experience of a female cadet in a predominantly male military academy, but it would not focus on the institutional issues of gender inequality in the government, economy, and military that led to the academy being predominantly male. By focusing on how any individual becomes socialized into the norms and values of his or her social group and thereby shapes a sense of self, interactionism focuses on different questions than the two macro-theoretical perspectives.
Some sociologists, frustrated with symbolic interactionism’s inability to study social problems, have combined it with conflict theory and created social constructionism. This theory begins with the social construction of reality, just as symbolic interactionism does: every society creates norms, values, objects, and symbols that it finds meaningful and useful. Along the way, though, different categories or groups of people in the society get different rewards, as conflict theory states. Some have more, some have less. Social constructionists argue that this stratification—while felt in the world by individuals—is ultimately created and sustained through social systems, which must be made more just.

So, constructionists would argue that it is more important to study the idea of poverty than individual poor people (Best 2012). They focus on the constructed nature of every stratification system (e.g., wealth/poverty, race, sex/gender, age, the digital divide, etc.). In turn, they see the possibilities for change embedded in social interactions that can persuade particular audiences (e.g., Congress, the mayor, the local press). So, for example, if poverty is constructed as "something that will always be with us"—if everyone believes that to be true—then policymakers do not have to focus their time, energy, or efforts on reducing poverty. However, if poverty is constructed as something that the richest country in the world can—and should—eliminate, then policymakers will feel more pressure to create policies that work to minimize, if not eradicate, poverty. So too, how the press covers policy makers will shift based on how poverty (or any other social problem) is socially constructed.

Using Symbolic Interactionism to Understand the Meitiv Family

We now return to the Meitiv family one last time, to examine their situation through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Danielle and Alexander Meitiv socialized their children by modeling appropriate behavior and incrementally giving them more responsibility. They then provided feedback to the children on their behavior. Part of that socialization process involved having the children walk together short distances. The parents followed behind the children, without their knowledge, to observe their behavior during these solo outings. What they saw led them to trust that their children could cope with any possibilities that might occur when they walked the mile home from school together. These successful outings boosted the children’s self-concepts. Danielle described the reasoning behind their socialization methods, saying that “I think it’s absolutely critical for their development—to learn responsibility, to experience the world, to gain confidence and competency” (St. George 2015b, paragraph 6).

“We wouldn’t have let them do it if we didn’t think they were ready for it,” Danielle said. She said her son and daughter have previously paired up for walks around the block, to a nearby 7-Eleven and to a library about three quarters of a mile away. “They have proven they are responsible,” she said. “They’ve developed these skills.” (St. George 2015b, paragraph 4)

But while the Meitiv parents felt that they were properly socializing their children, others did not see the children’s behavior in the same way. They
wondered if the children had enough life experience to cope with whatever might happen. When the children were reported to the police the first time, they did not have a card the family had created, which said that “I am not lost. I am a free-range kid” (St. George 2015b, paragraph 11). Without that prop—a symbolic piece of information—the police officers who responded had little information to go on about who the children were and why they were out alone and therefore took them into protective custody.

As the family became caught up in the Child Protective Services legal system, Danielle claimed that these authority figures were attempting to socialize her children to be fearful, in contrast to the parents’ view that the world, overall, was a safe place for children:

My son told us that the social worker who questioned him asked, “What would you do if someone grabbed you?” and suggested that he tell us that he doesn’t want to go off on his own anymore because it’s dangerous and that there are “bad guys waiting to grab you.” This is how adults teach children to be afraid even when they are not in danger. (Meitiv 2015, paragraph 7)

When the Meitiv story became known via news stories in The Washington Post, it sparked controversy. Many parents weighed in—with many supportive but others opposed to their free-range parenting style. Their story showed that there are competing cultural understandings of what it means to be a child and to be a parent in U.S. culture.

The symbolic interactionist perspective can be used to understand how our interactions can lead to a variety of societal issues. In the Sociologists in Action, Chelsea Marty, an undergraduate at Valdosta State University, relates how she used symbolic interactionism to understand how the internalization of racism and racial stereotypes can lead to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism. Chelsea also describes the steps she is taking to confront and tackle these social problems.

Consider This
Describe your hometown using one of the theoretical perspectives described here. Which one will you use? Why?
Do you see social harmony or social oppression? Are you interested in how small groups in society construct and then implement their values?

The theoretical perspectives we have discussed give us ways to analyze human behavior. Each perspective (and the many theories it encompasses) offers the sociologist a unique viewpoint. None of them is the correct one; rather, each of the perspectives gives sociologists a particular lens with which to see human society. Structural functionalists focus on social order and institutions and agreement on the basic values that create and sustain that social order, but tend not to notice conflict and inequality. Conflict theorists do just the opposite; they see social problems caused by oppression and injustices but overlook moments of order and social harmony. Neither structural functionalists nor conflict theorists deal with the behavior of small groups, leaving that to symbolic interactionists who examine how culture is created and passed on to the next generation, but ignore macro issues of power and control, social harmony, and balance.

Most likely one or more of these perspectives make better sense to you, and that is fine. Practice using all three of them as you look around your social world, however. You will see how you can focus on different angles of society with each.

Full Theoretical Circle

Each family creates, within reason, its own norms for how to raise children and implements those norms. But what do we mean by “within reason”? Society determines what is “reasonable”; it is socially constructed. Over time, certain behavioral patterns will become more commonplace in society and become the institutionalized version (in this case, of the family institution).

And now we have come full circle: a small group creates its own norms. Over time, some of those norms get shared between more members of the society as people interact, which is what symbolic interaction studies. These norms end up constructing sets of statuses and roles around key aspects of how society operates and creates social institutions. Once social institutions become routinized, they shape society and how individuals react to those social institutions, which structural functionalism analyzes. And inevitably, power differentials are created between the have and the have-nots in social institutions and in the broader society, which the conflict perspective then analyzes.
Check Your Understanding

- Why is symbolic interaction a micro-level theoretical perspective?
- What do sociologists mean by “the self”?
- According to interactionists, how is society socially constructed?
- How can different groups of individuals see the same social problem differently? Can you give an original example of this?

Conclusion

Theoretical perspectives frame the social world for sociologists. They highlight some parts of human behavior and blur others. Many sociologists use the lenses of multiple theoretical perspectives to compensate for the theoretical oversights of each perspective. The theoretical language you have learned in this chapter will reemerge in many future chapters, because these are the main ways sociologists see human behavior. Chapter 3 will add to your sociological skill set by showing you the varied ways that sociologists collect data about the social world—to which we then apply theoretical perspectives.

Sociologists in Action

Courageous Conversations about Race

Chelsea Marty

In the fall semester of 2015, I became involved with a speaker series titled Courageous Conversations about Race (CCR). This series grew out of an effort to address racial tension present on our college campus. We wanted students, faculty, and other members of the community to feel open and safe enough to discuss racial topics and concepts that otherwise go unexplored. In the process, we hoped to create a campus environment more inclusive and appreciative of diversity.

While working with CCR, I eventually became a member of the organizing and planning team. I, along with my research partner and friend Ashlie Prain, created a student-led CCR series in the spring semester of 2016. This series featured students who gave presentations, panels, and performances that focused on racial issues. Topics included White supremacy, colorism, intersectionality, police brutality, and race and politics.

During one CCR, I presented on the research project “The Path of Our Narratives,” which I conducted with Ashlie Prain. Using narratives of racism encountered in childhoods, we discussed the early internalization of racism and racial stereotypes. We then connected the early socialization of such biases to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism.

My presentation and approach to constructing this series are closely related to the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionists focus on the social construction of reality and how interpretations and experiences shape our social structure. This is evident in my presentation as I point out how childhood experiences of racism can be linked to the institutionalization of racism itself.

For example, one narrative was of a young White girl being moved from a predominantly Black school to a predominantly White school. As a child, she was told this move was for her own good and that she would make better friends and have better opportunities. While this individual story may seem insignificant, it actually is indicative of the racial biases used to structure our school system. Such biases contribute to the segregation, underfunding, and lack of resources that severely damage the quality of education that marginalized groups in our society receive.

Additionally, the series as a whole reflected how social interpretations of race have influenced our actions, relationships, politics, and much more. Through an understanding of this major sociological perspective, we can collectively work to recognize and dismantle racial biases and stereotypes.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of CCR is that, in addition to sparking conversation and promoting education, it inspires action and encourages community involvement. Several individuals from the community have taken on the responsibility of planning more talks and campaigns that address racial issues within our community, and I look forward to being a part of those efforts.

Chelsea Marty is a student at Valdosta State University majoring in sociology and anthropology. She intends to earn her master’s in sociology at Valdosta State and looks forward to eventually becoming a sociology professor and using sociological tools to work with others to improve our communities.
CHAPTER 2

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Review

2.1 Why and how do sociologists use theoretical perspectives?

The three theoretical perspectives—structural functionalism, conflict, and symbolic interactionism—help sociologists to examine the complexities of social life. Theories provide structure to the vast data that sociologists gather and allow us to find patterns in human behavior.

2.2 What is structural functionalism?

Structural functionalism is a macro-level theoretical perspective that help us analyze an entire society and how its parts work together. Structural functionalists tend to see social harmony and social equilibrium, based on the perceived smooth interactions of the seven social institutions. Structural functionalism is a "big-picture" way of viewing societies. Imagine a sociologist standing at a distance and looking at how society and its parts are working together.

2.3 What is a conflict perspective?

Conflict perspectives are macro-level perspectives that analyze entire societies. While structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see inequality—the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status. Conflict focuses on the oppression and injustice at work in society caused by the haves’ excessive political, economic, and social power. Conflict thinkers advocate for rapid social change to give more social rewards to the have-nots.

2.4 What is symbolic interactionism?

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective that focuses on the individual or small groups rather than an entire society. Symbolic interactionists focus on how the self is constructed through socialization and how a group socially constructs norms and values that then govern the group’s behaviors. Symbolic interactionism helps us to understand how individuals can shape, as well as be shaped by, society. It also helps us study how meaning comes to be constructed and shared by a group of people. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.

2.5 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interactionism work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Each of the major theoretical perspectives provides a different view of society. Structural functionalists focus on how the social institutions of society can work together to create and sustain social order but tend to overlook inequality and conflict. Conflict theorists focus on inequality and conflict but tend to overlook social order and consensus in society. Neither of these macro perspectives focus on individuals and small groups in society. Symbolic interactionists use a micro lens to focus on how individuals and small groups work together to create and re-create society. In the process, they show how individuals develop a sense of self through socialization. Together, structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interactionism give us a more complete view and understanding of how society works.
Key Terms

- alienation 25
- back stage 30
- bourgeoisie 24
- communism 26
- conflict theory/conflict perspective 24
- culture 29
- dysfunctions 19
- false consciousness 25
- front stage 30
- latent functions 19
- lumpenproletariat 24
- macro level of analysis 18
- manifest functions 19
- means of production 24
- mechanical solidarity 18
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- presentation of self 30
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- props 30
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- social change 21
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- social harmony 18
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- social scripts 30
- social solidarity 18
- species being 25
- structural functionalism 17
- symbolic interactionism 29
- theoretical perspective 17
- theory 17
- true consciousness 25
- unit of analysis 19
- value coercion 26
Half of all Americans believe that immigrants increase crime in the United States, but in fact, immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than those born in the United States. Research allows us to distinguish fact from perception.

Learning Questions

3.1 Why do sociologists do research?
3.2 What are some of the different ways that sociologists collect data?
3.3 How do sociologists analyze data?
3.4 Think of a topic you might like to study. What would be the first steps in developing a research project on that topic?
3.5 Think of a hypothesis you’d like to test. What are the variables you would use to test it, and what type of sample would you use?
3.6 How do sociologists evaluate the quality of research?
3.7 How do sociologists evaluate news articles and graphical presentations that use survey data?