

Theoretical Perspectives

"What I have been trying to say to intellectuals, preachers, scientists -- as well as more generally to publics -- can be put into one sentence: Drop the liberal rhetoric and the conservative default; they are now parts of one and the same official line; transcend that line" (C Wright Mills, The Causes of World War Three, 1958:183).

I. What is a Theoretical Perspective?

Perspectives might best be viewed as models.

- Each perspective makes assumptions about society.
- Each one attempts to integrate various kinds of information about society.
- Models give meaning to what we see and experience.
- Each perspective focuses on different aspects of society.
- Certain consequences result from using a particular model.

No one perspective is best in all circumstances. The perspective one uses may depend upon the question being asked. If one is exploring bureaucratic organization, then one might like to use a perspective that is concerned with social order. On the other hand, if one is concerned with social inequality, then perhaps the conflict perspective is more useful.

Perhaps the best perspective is one which combines many perspectives.

II. The Functionalist Perspective

- The origins of the functionalist perspective can be traced to the work of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim.
- The problem of maintaining social order is a central problem for understanding society.

- Understanding society from a functionalist perspective is to visualize society as a system of interrelated parts. All the parts act together even though each part may be doing different things.
- Institutions, such as family, education, and religion are the parts of the social system and they act to bring about order in society.
- Integration of the various parts is important. When all the "parts" of the system work together, balance is maintained and the over all order of the system is achieved.
- Social structures in society promote integration, stability, consensus, and balance.

A. A System With Parts

The parts of society, while performing different functions, work together to maintain the stability of the whole social system.

In order to understand the idea of "social system," it may be helpful to visualize a different kind of system. For example, biological organisms are systems. In fact, many sociologists use biological models to explain human society. The biological metaphor is successful in that it calls attention to how a social "organism" consists of various unique parts. Those parts, in turn, function together to support and maintain the whole system.

B. What's the Purpose?

Functionalists, like Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, are interested in how the parts of the social system contribute to the continuation of the social system. When functionalists encounter the various aspects of society, they may ask "What is its purpose?" A primary purpose of all parts (institutions like police, newspapers, religion) is to encourage consensus.

Merton (see Robertson, 1989:12) distinguishes between manifest functions, latent functions, and dysfunctions.

1. Manifest Functions

Manifest functions refer to functions that are obvious.

Examples:

The manifest function of schools is to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The manifest function of the military is to defend the nation.

The manifest function of criminal justice is to keep the streets safe for a society's citizens.

2. Latent Functions

Latent functions are functions that are unrecognized. They may even be important functions, but their consequence is not obvious.

Example:

- College students, in the course of pursuing their education, may make good friends.
- Merton described college as a "mate selection market" where students meet prospective marriage partners.

3. Dysfunctions

A perspective that is highly concerned about order is by definition concerned about what happens when social order breaks down. Merton uses the term dysfunction, which refers to a negative consequence that may disrupt the system. Dysfunction also conjures up the notion that a social phenomenon can be functional in one setting and dysfunctional in another.

Examples:

Over Population

Pollution

C. Critique of Functionalism

1. Functionalism Resists Change

Invoking a biological model has certain built-in assumptions connected to it. Biological organisms do not perform very well when they encounter great change in their environment. Society, however, is not biological. It is social. Social systems can tolerate much greater change than can biological systems.

2. Functionalism is Inherently Conservative

Change tends to be viewed as a negative consequence. All the parts of society act as a part of a unified system. Altering one part of the system has impact on all the other parts. Therefore, there is a tendency to protect existing institutions out of a fear that change in one area of society will adversely influence other parts of society. Fear of creating disorder in society is often used as a justification for avoiding change.

III. The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists see society less as a cohesive system and more as an arena of conflict and power struggles. Instead of people working together to further the goals of the "social system,"

- People are seen achieving their will at the expense of others.
- People compete against each other for scarce resources.
- Basic inequalities between various groups is a constant theme of conflict theory.
- Power, or the lack of it, is also a basic theme of conflict theory.
- Since some people benefit at the expense of others, those who benefit use ideology to justify their unequal advantage in social relationships.

Marx is a conflict theorist. He argued that the struggle between social classes was the major cause of change in society. Much change, in fact, happens as rich people and poor people compete over scarce resources.

Not all conflict theorists are Marxist. Weber is also a conflict theorist. Where as Marx focused on class conflict as the "engine" of historic change, others see conflict among groups and individuals as a fact of life in any society. Conflict can occur over many other aspects of society unrelated to class. For example, conflict can occur over water rights (in West Texas and New Mexico). Conflict occurs when two people have a car accident. Conflict occurs between men and women.

A. Conflict and Change

As a result of tension, hostility, competition, and disagreements over goals and values, change is one of the basic features in society. In general, change occurs because of inequality and the battle over scarce resources. Conflict occurs because people want things (power, wealth, and prestige) that are in short supply. One should realize that conflict is not intrinsically bad. Conflict

provides grounds where people unite in order that they may act on their common interests. Conflict is the motor for desirable change.

B. Who Benefits?

Like the functionalists, conflict theorists recognize the existence of social structures, but instead of structures existing for the good of the whole system, social structures (institutions) serve the interests of the powerful. One should also recognize the flip side of this coin. Structures that serve the powerful also are designed to keep other groups in society in their place for the privilege of others.

Instead of following the functionalist path of addressing dysfunction (i.e. something that doesn't work) conflict theorists would ask "Who Benefits?"

Example: Acid rain

Acid rain is not "bad" for everyone. The powerful people who control polluting industries stand to make huge profits by not providing proper air purification.

C. Ideology

Cooperation is not assumed.

- The idea of society being an integrated system based on consensus is a manufactured idea.
- The powerful influence or coerce the rest of the population into compliance and conformity.
- Social order is maintained, not by popular agreement, but rather by the direct or indirect exercise of power."

IV. The Interactionist Perspective

The Interactionist perspective takes the position that it is people who exist and act. All the other "structures" found in society are nothing but human creations. For the Interactionists, society is always in a process of being created, and this occurs through communication and negotiation.

- Symbolic Interactionists are called micro-sociologists.
- The scope of investigation for these sociologists is very small. Interactionists prefer to explore the interaction of individuals or groups of individuals.

- Interaction is generally face-to-face and addresses "everyday" activities. Society occurs as a result of interaction between individuals and small groups of individuals over long periods of time.
- They are interested in the way individuals act toward, respond to, and influence one another in society.
- People negotiate meaning in their lives. Each communication produces new perspectives, expectations, and boundaries that individuals use to assure continual interactions in the future.
- Micro-sociologists are not interested in institutions (e.g., the economy and government), social class, and nation-states. Theorists belonging to symbolic interactionist perspective are least likely to be concerned with the state or the economy. They might further argue that those institutions cannot exist by themselves.

A. Change

- Society is dynamic.
- Change occurs as a result of interaction between individuals.
- Continuous change, not stable patterns, characterizes the real nature of society. This kind of change is much less deterministic than change associated with the conflict perspective. Marxists look for change that is determined by characteristics in the social structure. Change from the Interactionist perspective is free-form.

B. Reference Groups

Much interaction takes place in "reference groups."

- Reference groups include professional organizations, friendship groups, doctors and medical people, education, and the community in which we live.
- Some are more stable than others, but change is a common feature in all reference groups.
- Change occurs as people communicate with one another.

C. Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction is a major sub-category of the Interactionist perspective. Robertson (1989:15) argues that "the interaction that takes place between people occurs through symbols." He calls a symbol "anything that can meaningfully represent something else."

D. Shared Meaning

As individuals and small groups first negotiate patterns of social interaction, and then come to rely on those patterns, expectations become more fixed in social structure. Eventually, people come to accept those patterns as part of their reality. Often they cannot see beyond that reality. Choices are made within that reality. Once people that accept certain aspects in society are "real," real consequences flow from that reality. The "witches" at Salem discovered this the hard way.

**"If people define situations as real,
then they are real in their consequences."**

The W. I. Thomas Theorem
