THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

FUNCTIONALISM, CONFLICT THEORY AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONALISM
DO NOW: IN JOURNALS

• Explain one example from your life that illustrates conformity within a group.
Perception – is the way the brain interprets an image or an event.

Perspective - is the way you interpret the meaning of an image or event.
RED RIDING HOOD: MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

• With a partner, write down the main points of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. (Include the message the story is supposed to convey)
• Read the story from a different point of view
• Summarize the differences between the two stories in your journal.
  • Why do you think there are differences?
  • Which story do you believe? The Wolf’s or Red’s? Why?
MORAL OF THE STORY

• Viewing things through multiple perspectives is important to understanding the whole picture.
• Using multiple perspectives is something we will be doing throughout the course.
Theoretical perspective – is a set of assumptions about an area of study, about the workings of society. It is viewed as true by its supporters and it helps them organize their research.
Sociology has three perspectives:

- Functionalism
- Conflict Theory
- Symbolic Interactionism
Functionalist

Emphasizes the contributions (functions) of each part of a society

Society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts that work together.
A theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of various parts, each with a function that, when fulfilled, contributes to society’s equilibrium; also known as functional analysis and structural functionalism.

To understand society functionalists say we need to look at:

- Structure: How the parts of society fit together to make the whole
- Function: What each part does, how it contributes to society
Changes in one function will lead to changes in another.
According to Functionalisists, society always tries to balance itself out.
There are 2 kinds of functions in society...

**Manifest Functions**
Intended and recognized.

**Latent Functions**
Unintended and unrecognized.
LATENT VS. MANIFEST FUNCTION EXAMPLE

• Government officials become concerned about the low rate of childbirth
• Congress offers a $10,000 bonus for every child born to a married couple
  • The intention or, manifest function, of the bonus is to increase childbearing within the family unit
• The bonus works! As the birth rate jumps, so does the sale of diapers and baby furniture
  • Benefits that were not the intended consequences= latent functions
• But… the government failed to specify a “stopping point” with regard to the bonus system
• To collect more bonuses, some people continue to have children
• The more children they have the more they rely on their bonus to survive
  • Large families become common, and poverty increases. Welfare is reinstated, taxes jump, and the nation erupts in protest
    • Because these were not intended consequences, and they harmed the social system, they are considered latent dysfunctions
TYPES OF FUNCTIONS

- Manifest Functions - Intended and recognized
  - School for education
- Latent Functions - unintended and not obvious
  - School to build social relationships
- Dysfunction - negative consequences
FUNCTIONALISM: IN SUM

- Emphasizes the contributions and cooperation of each part of a society
  - Whenever we examine a smaller part, we need to look for its functions and dysfunctions to see how it is related to the larger unit
  - A change in 1 part leads to changes in the others
- Society returns to stability (equilibrium) after periods of change
Conflict Theory

Emphasizes conflict, competition, change, and constraint within a society.

It is those with the most power: wealth, prestige, privileges, the ability to control the behavior of others.
KARL MARX & CONFLICT THEORY

• The key to human history is class conflict
• In each society, a small group controls the means of production and exploits those who are not in control
• In industrialized societies the conflict is between the bourgeoisie (those who control the means to produce wealth) and the proletariat (those who are exploited)
CONFLICT THEORY TODAY

• Extend conflict theory to explain how opposing interests permeate every layer of society
  • Small group, organization, community, entire society
  • People are in a constant balancing act, with conflict lying uneasily just underneath
Why is the U.S. divorce rate so high?

Conflict theorists will focus on how men and women’s relationships have changed.

For millennia, men dominated women.

- Industrialization gave women more power, women could meet their basic survival needs without marriage.
CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE: IN SUM

- Emphasizes, conflict, competition, change, and constraints in society
- Focuses on disagreements and competition based on preservation
- Conflict creates social change
Symbolic Interactionism

Symbol = anything that stands for something else and has an agreed upon meaning attached to it
SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM

• Symbols: things to which we attach meaning
  • Are the key to understanding how we view the world and communicate with one another
• Without symbols, our social life would be no more sophisticated than that of animals
  • Example of “symbolic relationships”: aunt, uncle, teacher, employer, brother, sister, friend—symbols can tell us how we are related to each other
  • Other “symbols”: love, marriage, divorce, parenthood, etc.
These two sociologists looked at the actual interaction of people, themselves.
Coined the term “symbolic interactionism”.

✓ We learn the meaning of a symbol from the way we see others reacting to it.

✓ Once we learn the meanings of symbols, we base our behavior on them.

✓ We use the meanings of symbols to imagine how others will respond to our behavior.
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

• Focuses on the interaction between people based on understood symbols—not the larger picture
  • We learn the meanings of the symbols based on how others react to those symbols
  • We then base our behaviors on those observations
• Base which behaviors we engage in on how we think others will react to our actions
A major difference between these three theoretical perspectives is their level of analysis.

- Functionalists and conflict theorists focus on the macro level
  - Examine large scale patterns of society
MACRO VS. MICRO

• Symbolic interactionists usually focus on the micro level
  • On social interaction—what people do when they are in one another’s presence
# THREE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Usual Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Focus of Analysis</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
<th>Applied to U.S. Divorce Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interactionism</td>
<td>Micro: examines small-scale patterns of social interaction</td>
<td>Face-to-face interaction, how people use symbols to create social life</td>
<td>Symbols, Interaction, Meanings, Definitions</td>
<td>Industrialization and urbanization changed marital roles and led to a redefinition of love, marriage, children and divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionalism</td>
<td>Macro: examines large-scale patterns of social interaction</td>
<td>Relationships among the parts of society; how these parts are functional or dysfunctional</td>
<td>Structure, Functions, Dysfunctions, Equilibrium</td>
<td>As social change erodes traditional functions of the family, family ties weaken, and the divorce rate increases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Theory</td>
<td>Macro: examines large-scale patterns of social interaction</td>
<td>The struggle for scarce resources by groups in a society; how the elites use their power to control the weaker group</td>
<td>Inequality, Power, Conflict, Competition, Exploitation</td>
<td>When men control economic life, the divorce rate is low because there are few alternatives for women. The high divorce rate reflects a shift in the power between men and women</td>
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</tbody>
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JOURNAL:

• Of the three theoretical perspectives, which one would you prefer to use if you were a sociologist, and why?
• Considering the macro- and micro-level approaches in sociology, which one do you think better explains social life? Why?
PUTTING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES TOGETHER

• Because each theory focuses on different features of social life, each provides a distinct interpretation.
• Consequently, we need to use all three theoretical lenses to analyze human behavior.
• By combining the contributions of each, we gain a more comprehensive picture of social life
ON A SEPARATE SHEET OF PAPER:

• Compare and contrast the natural and social sciences
• Explain what distinguishes sociology from other social sciences
• Summarize the major points of symbolic interactionism, functionalism, and conflict theory.