

Social Theories

Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Explain the major assumptions of each of the three major theoretical perspectives.
- Compare and contrast the three major theoretical perspectives.
- Apply the three major theoretical perspectives to everyday life.

MAKING SENSE OF ABSTRACT THEORIES

Sociological theories are the core and underlying strength of the discipline. They guide researchers in their studies; they also guide practitioners in their intervention strategies. And they will provide you with a basic understanding of how to see the larger social picture in your own personal life. A sociological **theory** is a set of interrelated concepts used to describe, explain, and predict how society and its parts are related to each other. Let's use binoculars as a metaphor to illustrate the usefulness of a theory. Binoculars serve to magnify, enlarge, clarify, and expand our view of the thing we are looking at. Unlike binoculars, you can't see or touch a theory, but it is a framework to help you "see" the world sociologically. Some things you want to look at need 20x80 strength binoculars while you might see other things better with 8x40 or 10x30 lenses. It's the same with society. Some things need the lens of Conflict Theory, while others need a Structural Functionalist or Symbolic Interactionist lenses. Some social phenomena can be viewed using each of the three frameworks, although each will give you a slightly different view of the topic under investigation.

Theories are sets of interrelated concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to magnify, enlarge, clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviors, and their societies. Without theories, science would be a futile exercise in statistics. In the diagram below, you can see the process by which a theory leads sociologists to perform a certain type of study with certain types of questions that can test the assumptions of the theory. Once the study is administered, the findings and generalizations can be considered to see if they support the theory. If they do, similar studies will be performed to repeat and fine-tune the process. If the findings and generalizations do not support the theory, the sociologist rethinks and revisits the assumptions they made.

Here's a real-life scientific example: In the 1960s, two researchers named Cumming and Henry studied the processes of aging. They devised a theory on aging that had assumptions built into it. These were, simply put, that all elderly people realize the inevitability of death and begin to systematically disengage from their previous youthful roles while at the same time society prepares to disengage from them.¹ Cumming and Henry tested their theory on a large number of elderly persons. Findings and generalization consistently yielded a "no" in terms of support for this theory. For all intents and purposes this theory was abandoned and is only used in references such as these. Theories have to be supported by research and they also provide a framework for how specific research should be conducted.

Theories can be used to study society—millions of people in a state, country, or even at the world level. When theories are used at this level they are referred to as **macro-level theories**, *theories which best fit the study of massive numbers of people* (typically Conflict and Functional theories). When theories are used to study small groups or individuals, say a couple, family, or team, they are referred to as being **micro-level theories**, *theories which best fit the study of small groups and their members* (typically Symbolic Interactionism). In many cases, any of the three main theories can be applied at either the macro or micro levels. We call these theoretical perspectives, as there are a number of theories that can be categorized into each perspective, and some theories overlap perspectives. Let's consider the three major theoretical perspectives one at a time.

CONFLICT THEORY

The Conflict Theory is a macro-level theory designed to study the larger social, national, regional, or global levels of sociological phenomena. This theory was founded by Karl Marx. Marx was a witness to oppression perpetrated by society's elite members against the masses of poor. He had very little patience for the capitalistic ideals that undergirded these powerful acts of inhumane exploitation of the average person. To him, struggle was innate to all human societies. Later Max Weber further developed this sociological theory and refined it to a more moderate position. Weber studied capitalism further, but argued against Marx's outright rejection of it.

Conflict theory is especially useful in understanding a wide variety of social phenomena: war, wealth and poverty, the *haves* and the *have-nots*, revolutions, political strife, exploitation, divorce, ghettos, discrimination and prejudice, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, slavery, and other conflict-related social phenomena. **Conflict Theory claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict and competition for limited resources.** Marx and Weber, were they alive today, would likely use Conflict Theory to study the unprecedented bail outs by the U.S. government which have proven to be a poor-to-rich (because it is the average person's tax dollars that have gone to bail out banks) wealth transfer, and to help guide the explanation of private health care companies benefiting from illness and poverty.

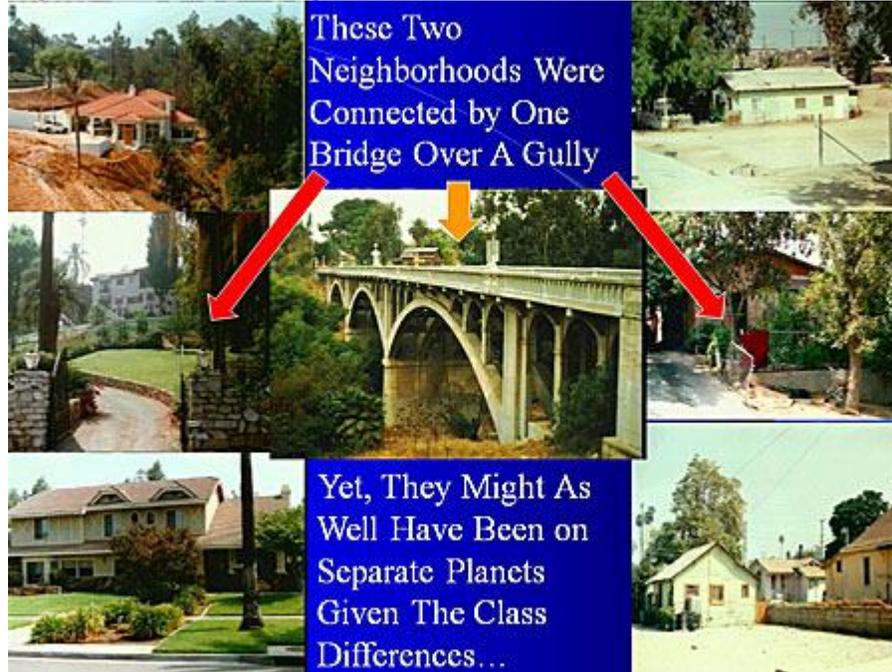
Conflict Theory assumes that those who "have" perpetually try to increase their wealth at the expense and suffering of those who "have-not." It is a power struggle that is most often won by the wealthy elite and lost by the common person of common means. The "haves" are those who possess power. What they health is wealth. **Power is the ability to get what one wants even in the presence of opposition.** When power is institutionalized, we call it authority. **Authority is institutionalized, legitimate power.** By **institutionalized** we mean *making something (for example a concept, a social role, particular values and norms, or modes of behavior) official by embedding it within an organization, social system, or society as an established custom or norm within that system*².

By far, the *haves*, in Marx's terms, the **bourgeoisie** or *wealthy elite (the royal, political, and corporate leaders)* have the most power. The bourgeoisie are the Goliaths in society who

often bully their wishes into outcomes. They own and control the means of production. The *have-nots* or Marx's **proletariat** are the common working class, lower class, and poor members of society. They must sell their labor for a wage in order to survive. According to Marx (see diagram below) the bourgeoisie and proletariat cannot both have it their way. Furthermore, in order to offset the wealth and power of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat rise up and revolt against their oppressors (The French, Bolshevik, United States, Mexican, and other revolutions are examples).

Marx and Weber realized that societies have different social classes and a similar pattern of relatively few rich persons in comparison to the majority who are poor. The rich "call the shots." Look below at the photographic montage in Figure 1 of homes in one U.S. neighborhood that were run down, poor, trashy, and worth very little. They were on the west side of a gully, frustrating those who lived on the east side who were forced to drive through these slums to reach their own mansions.

Figure 1. Photo Montage of *Haves* and *Have-Nots* in a U.S. Neighborhood³



The Conflict Theory has been repeatedly tested against scientifically derived data, and it repeatedly proves to have a wide application among many different levels of sociological study. That is not to say that all sociological phenomena are conflict-based. But, most Conflict theorists would argue that more often than not Conflict assumptions do apply. **Feminist theory** is a theoretical perspective that is couched primarily in Conflict Theory assumptions, but has added the dimension of sex or gender to the study of society. Feminist theorists are interested in the inequalities in opportunities between men and women.

STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM THEORY

*The **Functionalist Theory** perspectives claims that society is in a state of balance and kept that way through the function of society's component parts. Society can be studied the same way that the human body can be studied: analyzing what specific systems are working or not working, diagnosing problems, and devising solutions to restore balance. Socialization, religious involvement, friendship, health care, economic recovery, peace, justice and injustice, population growth or decline, community, romantic relationships, marriage and divorce, and normal and abnormal family experiences are just a few of the evidences of functional processes in our society.*

Functionalists would agree with Conflict Theorists that break-downs, or dysfunctions, occur in society and that unfair treatment of others is common. **Dysfunctions** *are breakdowns or disruptions in society and its parts that threaten social stability.* Enron's collapse, the ruination of 14,000 employees' retirement funds, the loss of millions in shareholder investments, and the serious doubt it left in the mind of U.S. investors about the stock market's credibility and reliability, which lasted for nearly a decade, are examples of dysfunctions in the economy. Functionalists also look at two types of functions, manifest and latent functions. **Manifest functions** *are the apparent and intended functions of institutions in society,* while **latent functions** *are the less apparent, unintended, and often unrecognized functions in social institutions and processes.*

Continuing with the Enron example, the government's manifest function includes regulation of investment rules and laws in the stock market to ensure credibility and reliability. After the Enron collapse, every company offering stocks for trade underwent a government supervised audit of its accounting processes in order to restore the public trust. For the most part, balance was restored in the stock market (to a certain degree at least). There are still many imbalances in the investment, mortgage, and banking sectors which have to be readjusted; but, that's the point: society readjusts and eventually recovers.

Does the government also provide latent or accidental functions to society? Yes. Take U.S. military bases for example. Of all the currently open U.S. military bases, all are economic boons for the local communities surrounding them. All provide jobs, taxes, tourism, retail, and government contract monies that would otherwise go somewhere else. When the discussion about closing military bases comes up in Washington DC, Senators and members of Congress go to work trying to keep their community's bases open.

As you can already tell, Functionalism is more positive and optimistic than Conflict Theory. Functionalists realize that just like the body, societies get "sick" or dysfunction. By studying society's parts and processes, Functionalists can better understand how society remains stable or adjusts to destabilizing forces when unwanted change is threatened. According to this theory, most societies find that healthy balance and maintain it. If they don't, then they collapse as many have in the history of the world. **Equilibrium** *is the state of balance*

maintained by social processes that help society adjust and compensate for forces that might tilt it onto a path of destruction.

Getting back to the Conflict example of the gully separating extremely wealthy and poor neighborhoods, look at the Habitat for Humanity picture in Figure 2. Functional Theorists would say that component parts of society respond to dysfunctions in ways that help to resolve problems. In this house the foundation was dug, poured, and dried within a week. From the foundation to this point was three working days. This house is now finished and lived in, thanks mostly to the Habitat non-profit process and the work of many volunteers. Lots of homeless people are a dysfunction for society. Think about what would happen if half of society was homeless, for example. Another part of society, the normative organization of Habitat for Humanity, steps in and makes adjustments; they buy lots, get donations and volunteers, and build homes helping to bring society back into equilibrium.

Figure 2. Photo of a Habitat for Humanity Home⁴



SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM THEORY

Symbolic Interactionism *claims that society is composed of ever-present interactions among individuals who share symbols and their meanings.* This is a very useful theory for understanding other people, improving communication, and in understanding cross-cultural relations. Values, communication, witch hunting, crisis management, fear from crime, fads, love, evil and sin, what's hot and what's not, alien abduction beliefs, "who I am," litigation, mate selection, arbitration, dating joys and woes, and both personal and national. Meanings and definitions can all be better understood using Symbolic Interactionism. According to this theoretical perspective, meaning is created through social interaction.

Once you realize that individuals, by their social natures, communicate very symbolic with one another, then you begin to understand how to persuade your friends and family, how

to understand others' points of view, and how to resolve misunderstandings. This theory is interested in meanings. Think about these three words: LOVE, LUST, and LARD. Each letter is a symbol. When combined in a specific order, each word can be defined. Because we memorize words and their meanings we know that there is a striking difference between LOVE and LUST. We also know that LARD has nothing to do with either of the other two terms. Contrast these word pairs: hate versus hope, help versus hurt, advise versus abuse, and connect versus corrupt. These words, like many others, carry immense meaning and when juxtaposed sound like the beginning of philosophical ideas.

Symbolic Interactionism makes it possible for you to be a college student. It makes it so you understand your professors' expectations and know how to step up to them. Our daily interactions are filled with symbols and an ongoing process of interactions with other people based on the meanings of these symbols. Ever had anyone you've greeted actually answer your question of "How's it going?" Most of us never have. It's a greeting, not a question in the U.S. culture. A Symbolic Interactionist would be interested in how it changed from a question to a greeting.

Symbolic Interactionism helps you to know what the expectations of your roles are, and if you perceive yourself as doing a good job or not in meeting those expectations. The **Thomas Theorem** is often called the "Definition of the Situation." It says that *if people perceive or define something as being real, then it becomes real in its consequences*. An example of this is a woman who was diagnosed as HIV positive. She made her funeral plans, made sure her children would be cared for then prepared to die. Two-years later she was retested. It turned out her first test results were a false positive, yet she acted as though she had AIDS and was certainly going to die soon from it. She changed how she saw her remaining days. In a hypothetical case, a famous athlete defines himself as invincible and too famous to be held legally accountable for his criminal behavior. He is subsequently found guilty of a crime. A hypothetical politician believes that his/her constituents will tolerate anything, so he/she engages in morally reprehensible behavior. The point is that when we define our situation as being real, we act as though it is real, regardless of the objective facts in the matter.

One of the major realizations that comes with Symbolic Interactionism is that you begin to understand the other people in your life, and come to know that they are neither right nor wrong, but just have a different point of view. They define social symbols with varying meanings. To understand the other person's symbols and meanings is to approach a common ground.

Listen to this statement by Rosa Parks (1913-2005): "All I was doing was trying to get home from work." In 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on the bus to a White person, it proved to be a spark for the Civil Rights Movement that involved the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and many other notable leaders. It was Rosa Parks' simple and honest statement that made her act of defiance so meaningful. The lion's share of the nation was collectively tired and sick of the mistreatment of Black people. Many White people joined the protests while others quietly sympathized. After all that was written in the

history books about it, Rosa Parks simple yet symbolic gesture started the healing process for the United States.

*Comparing the Three Major Sociological Theories*⁵

Conflict	Structural Functionalism	Symbolic Interactionism
<i>Macro</i>	<i>Macro</i>	<i>Micro</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequality lies at the core of society which leads to conflict • Resources are limited • Power is not evenly distributed • Competition is inevitable (winners & losers) • Negotiations based on influence, threats, promises, and consensus • Threats and coercion • Any resource can be used as tool of power or exploitation • War is natural • Haves and have-nots • Privileges are protected by haves • Order is challenged by have-nots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses biological model (society is like a living organism) • Society has interrelated parts • What are functions or dysfunctions of parts • Society finds balance and is stable • Equilibrium • Society adjusts to maintain balance • How are parts integrated • Manifest functions • Latent functions and dysfunctions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society is an ongoing process of many social interactions • Interactions based on symbolic context in which they occur • Subjective perceptions are critical to how symbols are interpreted • Communications • Meanings • Roles • Self • Reality shaping in self and with others • Social construction of reality • Thomas Theorem • Definition of the Situation

¹ Maddox et al. 1987 The Encyclopedia of Aging, Springer Pub. NY. For a more scientifically supported theory on aging Google Activity Theory and or Continuity Theory.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutionalisation>

³ © 2009 Ron J. Hammond, Ph.D.

⁴ © 2009 Ron J. Hammond, Ph.D.

⁵ Prepared by Ron J. Hammond, Ph.D. 2008