

Compare and  
contrast the  
functionalist, conflict  
and the interactionist  
perspecti...



The paper "What Do Functionalists, Conflict Theorists, and Interactionists Believe in?" is a meaningful example of a term paper on sociology. The functionalist, conflict and interactionist theories hold different perspectives on the purposes of education. In this paper, the author describes the perspective of each theory and compares each with an emphasis on the existentialism fit into the three approaches.

The functionalist theorists believe that society is made up of social systems of interconnected parts. These structures encourage consensus and overall stability of a society. Functionalists differentiate between manifest function (obvious), latent function (hidden) and dysfunction (the negative consequence of break down of social order). (Long 2007 and Kendall 2004)

Unlike the functionalists' view of cohesion within a society, the conflict theorists view society as a combination of conflict and power interactions. Consistent with the ideas of the functionalists about social structures, conflict theorists also recognize social structures. However, these structures are seen as existing for the benefit of the powerful and to keep other members of society in their allotted position. Contrary to the functionalists' view of consensus as to the bedrock of social order, the conflict theorists view social order as being upheld by the application of power.

Unlike the functionalists and the conflict theorists, the interactionists believe that the 'structures' in society are human constructions. Society is constantly being shaped through communication. They explore the interactions of individuals rather than the group. Unlike the conflict theorists, interactionists do not pay attention to social class and nation-states, nor are they interested in institutions like the functionalists.

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Change, which is a product of interaction among individuals, for the interactionist is welcome. Initially, individuals and small groups negotiate patterns of social interaction, but eventually, these expectations become 'fixed' in social structure and the patterns become a measure of the society's reality. This reality, therefore, influences their choices. (Long 2007)

What is the purpose of education for the functionalists? Education attends to the needs of society. Functionalists view the manifest function of education as a means of passing on essential knowledge and expertise to the next generation. This function of education is seen as a means to socialize individuals with different personal history into the conventions of society. For the functionalists, latent functions of education include transference of foundational values and 'social control'. (Kendall 2004)

Another purpose of education which is viewed by both the functionalist and conflict theorists is sorting. For the functionalists, sorting set apart students based on merit but for the conflict theorists sorting is based on social class and ethnic groupings. Unlike the conflict theorists, however, the functionalists believe that social networking takes place after sorting. Thus, college students are able to make lifetime relationships with individuals who are at the same institution. Many individuals find their marriage partner through networking at an educational institution. (Kendall 2004)

Not only do functionalists believe that education maintains the social order but they believe that it changes culture also. Although education acts as a transmitter for cultural norms, it also transmits change and innovation in all aspects of society. For example, in today's world of same-sex marriages, education has played a major part in socializing individuals to this arena.

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The conflict theorists believe that the purpose of education is to preserve the social disparity and the power of those in authority. Whereas functionalists perceive education as contributing to the social order, conflict theorists argue that the education system acts as a channel for the upper class to coerce the lower classes into subjection and maintain their position in society. Kendall 2004 notes the hidden curriculum ('the transmission of cultural values and attitudes') is the main source of maintenance of inequalities amongst the upper classes and the lower classes. The rich have greater access to top-quality education than the poor and so the status quo would be maintained.

In direct opposition to the other two theories, the interactionists restrict their theorizing about the purpose of education on the basis of observation within the classroom. Kendall 2004 comments on the by interactionists' concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophesy'. This concept denotes that although a teacher's expectation of a student may be based on a false premise the end result will be that the student will, in reality, achieve at the level of expectation of the teacher. Interestingly, teachers expect students from the upper class to perform better than those from the lower class and they generally do.

Conflict theorists would agree with interactionist theorists on the impact of the expectation of teachers as promoting differences between the opportunities available to the upper class and the lower class. Labeling of students is another feature of interactionists. This labeling is in direct relation to the expectation of teachers towards the students. Kendall 2004 asserts that IQ testing contributes to the labeling of students. In like manner, the conflict theorists believe that IQ testing contributes to the disparity

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between those who have power and those without. They claim that the tests are culturally biased and so the upper class would perform better than those of the lower class.

Which of these three theories incorporate existentialism? Existentialism focuses on 'individual freedom' and 'choice'. (Eierman, 2008) Thus, the ideas of existentialism would fit into the interactionist theory that also focuses on the individual. Soren Kierkegaard claims that an individual needs to find his/her own distinctive profession in life. Interactionists also believe that individuals have the ability to improve themselves. (Long 2007)

Like the functionalists who tend to advance individualism as part of the values in education, existentialists also promote individualism in terms of 'morality and truth'. (Eierman, 2008) Change is a welcome phenomenon to the conflict theorists and also to Kierkegaard who sees freedom of choice is essential. Therefore one can conclude that Kierkegaard and his views on existentialism can fit into any one of the three perspectives. The author of this paper believes that the main thrust is towards the interactionists who focus on individuals more than the group focus of the functionalist and conflict perspectives.