

Exploring the three major theories in sociology essay example

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Throughout the history of the field of sociology, sociologists have studied sociology, or “ human behavior in society (Anderson and Taylor, 2011, p. 4)” using different theoretical frameworks. Sociologists examine how societies operate and take a closer look at social phenomena and problems using a variety of different theories. These several theories are generally categorized within three major, or macro, theories or perspectives: Structural Functionalism, Conflict Theory and Symbolic Interaction. Each of these theories is valuable and they are often blended or used together to explain social happenings.

Structural functionalism, or functionalism, approaches society as a system of interrelated parts. With this theory, it is possible to envision society as an organism like a human body, with different organs and systems working both independently and interacting with and relying upon each other. Whereas the human body consists of brain, heart and digestive system, society has components like an economic framework, government and religion. Each of these components of society can be studied individually but structural functionalists are primarily interested in the ways these systems and subsystems interact and function together. According to Anderson and Taylor (2011), “ Functionalism interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole.”

Structural functionalism was the dominant theory in American sociology from the 1930s to the 1970s (Applerouth, 2008, p. 349). Much of the origins of this theory come from Emile Durkheim, who suggested that “ functionalism conceptualizes society as more than the sum of its component parts (Anderson and Taylor, 2011, p. 16).”

Structural functionalism theory emphasizes social stability, consensus and order in society. One important aspect of this theory involves the way it views social problems or change. According to structural functionalism, when one part of society is dysfunctional, or not working, it influences other parts of society and creates problems, forcing change—either for the better or the worse—as the components of society need to adjust to restore stability. So, the systems in society attempt to return to balance by discarding dysfunctional or unnecessary parts, adapting to new needs or by becoming more complex. Through the lens of structural functionalism, social behavior is explained by the need for groups and society to maintain social stability. Building on the structural functionalism theory framework supplied by Durkheim were sociologists like Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. Persons theorized that parts of a social system are interrelated and also that these parts have different basic functions. Merton expanded upon functionalism theory, speculating that social practices have both manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are stated, intended outcomes of human behavior, while latent functions are not stated or intended. For example, one manifest function of a university is to supply young adults with an education while a latent function of a university may be that it serves as a place where young adults meet their potential spouses.

Much of the criticism of structural functionalism provides a natural segue way into conflict theory. Some criticism of structural functionalism includes that it places an inherently conservative emphasis on social stability, understates the role of conflict and power in society and is too accepting of the status quo.

Whereas structural functionalism emphasizes cohesion within society, conflict theory focuses on social inequality and friction. Conflict theory holds that society is split into groups that are competing for resources and social order is maintained by one or more groups dominating and holding power over other groups. Struggles in society are at the core of conflict theory. Conflict theory began to gain ground in the United States as the repression characteristic of the McCarthy and Cold War era lessened and the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s came to the forefront (Turner, 2006, p. 7). Much of conflict theory traces its origins to the works of Karl Marx. Marx discussed the transformation of societies from agricultural to industrial societies and the resulting concerns about provide that replaced concern over survival and the development of two broad classes, the “ bourgeoisie” and the “ proletariat,” or the owners of the means of productions and the wage-earning workers. Feminist theory that studies the inequality that exists in society between males and females and sees inequality between the genders as central to all societal organization is studying sociological phenomena from a conflict theory perspective. Under conflict theory, changes in society result from the constant struggle occurring between different groups. The primary criticism of conflict theory is that it places too great an emphasis on inequality and the importance of power while neglecting the importance of public consensus and shared values (Anderson and Taylor, 2011, p. 19).

The third major theory in sociology is symbolic interaction theory. This theory holds that individuals and groups and immediate social interactions between individuals create and change society, or that these social interactions

comprise “ society.” As humans, people have the ability to assign meaning to their behavior and interpret different events, actions and things. Symbolic interaction theory obtains its name because people develop and rely upon symbolic meanings during social interactions. With this theory, society is socially constructed and social order is constantly changing and negotiated through subjective interpretations of behavior. In spoken conversation, words are the obvious and most dominant symbols used in the interaction. The emphasis in symbolic interaction is on the subjective interpretation of symbols by individuals.

Two important theorists that largely developed or contributed to the framework of symbolic interaction theory are George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, who were both sociologists at the University of Chicago, where much of the work that this theory was derived from was produced. Cooley set forth the idea of the “ looking glass self” to describe the way a person’s conception of self develops. The looking glass self involves perceptions and develops from how an individual thinks they appear to others, how they think others judge them and how these two perceptions make that individual feel. This awareness of self and other makes up an important part of symbolic interaction theory. George Herbert Mead found that an individual’s identity and self-awareness arises from the roles one plays.

The greatest criticisms of symbolic interaction theory are that it fails to address the “ macro” level of society and does not sufficiently take into account the influence that institutions and larger social forces have on individual interactions.

The difference and similarities between these three major theories of are highlighted in the ways the theories approach different institutions or aspects of society. Take, for example, the way stratification, or social inequality, is imagined through each of the theories.

Structural functionalism argues that social inequality allows a fair distribution of resources, since higher social classes earn more money or have greater resources because they are more valuable to society. From a structural functionalism viewpoint, inequality also provides an incentive system and fosters solidarity among individuals or groups that share similar social standing (Anderson and Taylor, 2011, p. 18).

Conflict theorists hold the view that inequality is unfair and persists because groups that are at an advantage use their position and power for their own betterment, generally at the expense of other groups. Additionally, those in power may also be able to direct education, government, religion, technology and other institutions to their own advantage.

Symbolic interaction theory might not tackle stratification or social inequality from an encompassing or broad point of view but instead place focus on examining interpretations, or symbolic meaning, of equality and inequality and unequal and equal situations. Fields et al (2006), for example, explore the relationship between emotions and social interactions, particularly social inequality.

Just as when exploring social inequality through the three major sociological perspectives, the differences between the three theories are also made apparent when looking at culture. Structural functionalism is expressly interested in the role culture plays in society. Structural functionalism theory

might also be able to explain how two diverse cultures meeting could become more than the sum of their parts.

Conflict theory may look at culture or an aspect of culture and see conflict or signs of conflicting groups. The high cost of museum admissions, opera or musical tickets, dress codes for different places or events and limited non-personal vehicle transportation options to venues makes certain events or places inaccessible to some groups of people. Social groups in power may directly or indirectly exclude lower social groups. As history has shown, lines between divisions in power and without power often fall between cultures, subcultures or ethnic groups.

Symbolic interaction theorists might focus on how individuals perceive culture or the interactions between individuals with very different individual histories or roles. They might also explore the contribution or importance of an individual's actions or interpretations to society and culture.

One final, enlightening topic to explore through the lenses of these three different sociology theories is education, or the role of education in society. Structural functionalism looks at the various functions, both manifest and latent, of education in society. Some of the manifest functions of education include socialization, by teaching children basic academic subjects as well as societal norms and values, social integration that allows groups of individuals to develop common beliefs and values, social placement and technical and cultural innovation that results from education. In addition, structural functionalism would point to several latent functions that result from education. Parents, by sending their children to school, are taking advantage of free child care. The formation of relationships is another latent function of

education. Mandatory schooling to a certain age also helps to keep teenaged students out of the workforce and thus keeps the unemployment rate lower than it would otherwise be.

A conflict theory approach may not argue against the functions that the structural functionalism theory assigns to education, but it may point out that education, or the functions of education perpetuate or promote social inequality. Social class, race and ethnicity can affect social placement.

Conflict theorists might also point out flaws in standardized testing procedures and vast discrepancies between different schools. While children from wealthy families with parents that have attained a high level of education may live in an area with an excellent school system or be able to take advantage of private schools, children from low-income families with little or no ability to choose a school or school system based on the quality of education it provides face greater obstacles to learning than their wealthy counterparts. The material used in schooling may also, according to conflict theorists, promote the status quo and encourage unquestioning civil obedience.

Finally, symbolic interaction theory emphasizes study of the social interaction within school venues, like the interactions between students and students and teachers and any roles or expectations impressed upon students.

As these explorations of education, culture and social stratification have proven, each of the three major social theories have a place in sociological studies. It is only by understanding the origins of and history behind each of

the theories that a contemporary student of sociology can critically explore the societies around and separate from them.

References

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