

Functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory



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As one of the foundational theories of social science, functionalism endeavors to study society with a scientific eye, by gathering data and making judgments about how institutions work to keep a society in balance. The theory is based on the assumption that institutions, social norms, and a society's values have a function, namely to maintain homeostasis within the social system. With this assumption in mind, it is easy to see how the government acts as the primary institution keeping society in balance.

Michelle Obama's recent advocacy for the reduction of childhood obesity is an excellent illustration of how institutions and norms act to correct an imbalance in society. Ms. Obama claims that the impetus for the "Let's Move" campaign came not only from data showing a sharp rise in the last decade in childhood diabetes and obesity, but also from her own doctor's warning that one of her daughters might be developing a weight problem (Givhan). Ms.

Obama also cites the \$147 billion that obesity-related diseases cost the United States as a reason for the program (Givhan). From a functionalist perspective, the First Lady's efforts are a classic institutional response to a social imbalance. The institution acting in this case is the Office of the First Lady, a unique mixture of government institution and social custom. The Obama administration has pledged \$1 billion in funding for "Let's Move" over the next ten years.

A Functionalist interpretation of the initiative might also take note of how a problem that is more pronounced in economically disadvantaged and ethnic-minority populations came to the attention of the Obama administration and

not others. It seems that the Obama administration's ties to the communities most affected by childhood obesity made a response to the problem more likely. Symbolic interactionism differs from functionalism primarily in its emphasis on individuals, and not on larger social forces and institutions.

The theory holds that interactions between individuals creates and balances the social world. Interactionism casts individuals as pragmatic actors who play roles within society and adjust their actions according to their interpretation of the performances of others. The theory allows social actors not only to change their performances according to the script certain situations might require, but to shed their roles entirely and take up others. The recent scandal involving Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich illustrates how a social actor plays a role and then modifies that role in a different situation.

In 2008, Governor Blagojevich's public role was to choose the best candidate to fill President Obama's vacant Senate seat. Various political considerations affected the governor's choice, such as a desire to please the electorate that gave the Senate seat to Obama in the first place. But Governor Blagojevich had a different role to play behind closed doors, a role not in accordance with the electorate's ethical standards or Illinois' law. Blagojevich became a shrewd political schemer because of the power the appointment gave him.

Immediately after the presidential election, Blagojevich reportedly told an aide, " I'm willing to trade the thing [the appointment] I got" (Davey). He sought to gain personally from deciding who would be the next Illinois Senator, saying, " I'd like a four-year contract [to receive union money] for a million a year or somethin'" (Davey). The Governor had cast off his public

persona in order to negotiate with political insiders. The media and the electorate were dismayed at the difference between the two roles.

An interactionist interpretation of the Governor's different performances would point out how his public performance was pragmatic in its aim to maintain the proper role of government in society just as his private performance was pragmatic in its attempt to further his political prospects according to the norms of a group of political insiders. Conflict theory turns away from interactionism's focus on the individual and interprets the behavior of persons and groups in terms of competing social classes within society.

In this theory, the determining factor of behavior is economic and materialistic. The stratification in society makes exploitation necessary, with a group of elites oppressing groups of workers for profit. The tension caused by this oppression inevitably leads to class struggle. The behavior of individuals is interpreted in the context of that struggle. The recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico allows for an interpretation under conflict theory. Needing gulf coast fishing vessels to aid in the cleanup effort, British Petroleum contracted fishermen to help.

The contract BP offered, however, aroused the class struggle conflict theory sees at the root of social interaction. BP's lawyers asked participating fishermen to sign an agreement saying the company was not liable for any damage or injuries the fishermen might suffer during cleanup and forced them to agree not to speak to the media. The fishermen felt that the terms of the contract were oppressive and filed suit. One fisherman said, " We're

voicing our concerns about signing any contract with BP that would waive our rights" (Sahagun).

The fishermen's sensitivity to the oppression of a large corporation demonstrates the undercurrent of social conflict driving behaviors even during a disaster. In this case, the superstructure rewarded the fishermen for their resistance. A federal court voided the contracts some of the fishermen had already signed and made the future use of the contracts invalid. The media also widely derided BP for the terms of the contract, forcing the company to call its actions " a mistake" (Sahagun). The terms of social conflict determined the behavior of all parties.