

# Functionalist conflict and symbolic perspectives on education



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The basis of today's theoretical perspectives provides sociologists with a philosophical position for asking certain kinds of questions about society and the people that occupy it. The three primary perspectives are functionalist, conflict, and interactionist. These three theories are very relative to education and the whole learning process. These different perspectives allow sociologists the ability to explain how society influences people and their actions. Each perspective uniquely conceptualizes society, social forces, and human behavior.

The functionalist perspective, also known as functionalism, states that each aspect of society is interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole. The government, or state, provides education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes on which the state depends to keep itself running. The family is dependent upon the school to help children grow up to have good jobs so that they can raise and support their own families. With this being said, the children become law-abiding and taxpaying citizens, who in turn support the state. The parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. If something goes wrong, the parts of society then must adapt to recapture a new order, stability, and productivity. For example, the financial recession we are in right now, with the high rates of unemployment and inflation, social programs and their budgets are usually cut back because funding isn't available. Families end up having to cut back on their spending and budget as well just to make ends meet. Functionalists believe that society is held together by social consensus and work together to achieve what is best for society as a whole.

The functionalist perspective was popular during the 1940s and 1950s among American sociologists. American functionalists focused on discovering the functions of human behavior and European functionalists focused on explaining the inner workings of social order. Sociologist Robert Merton, who was born in 1910, divided human functions into two different types: manifest functions are those that are intentional and obvious and latent functions are those that are unintentional and not obvious. For example, my manifest function of attending my church is to worship, receive the word, and help children, but my latent function may be to help those children learn to discern religious and personal views. Manifest functions are apparent, while the latent functions have a more sociological approach. A sociological approach in functionalism is the consideration of the relationship between the functions of smaller parts and the functions of the whole.

Functionalism has received criticism for neglecting the negative functions of something such as abuse. Critics claim that the perspective justifies the status quo and complacency on the part of society's members. Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when such change may benefit them. Instead, functionalism sees active social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate naturally for any problems that may arise.

Karl Marx's writings on class struggles sparked the conflict perspective. The conflict perspective presents society in a different light than do the functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives. The conflict perspective focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. Unlike functionalists who defend the status quo, avoid social change, <https://assignbuster.com/functionalist-conflict-and-symbolic-perspectives-on-education/>

and believe people cooperate to effect social order, conflict theorists challenge the status quo, encourage social change, and believe rich and powerful people force social order on the poor and the less fortunate.

American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s generally ignored the conflict perspective in favor of the functionalist, the 1960s saw American sociologists gain interest in conflict theory. They also expanded Marx's idea that the key conflict in society was strictly economic. Today, conflict theorists find social conflict between any groups in which the potential for inequality exists such as race, gender, religion, political views, and economic stance, etc. Conflict theorists note that unequal groups usually have conflicting values and agendas, causing them to compete against one another. This constant competition between groups forms the basis for the ever-changing nature of society.

Critics of the conflict perspective point out its negative view of society. The theory attributes humanitarian efforts, altruism, democracy, civil rights, and other positive aspects of society to capitalistic designs to control the masses, not to inherent interests in preserving society and social order.

The symbolic interactionist perspective, directs sociologists to consider the symbols and details of everyday life, what these symbols mean, and how people interact with each other. Although symbolic interactionist perspective traces its origins to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world, the American philosopher George H. Mead (1863-1931) introduced this perspective to American sociology in the 1920s.

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, people attach meanings to symbols, and then they act according to their subjective interpretation of these symbols. Verbal conversations, in which spoken words serve as the predominant symbols, make this subjective interpretation very evident. The words have a certain meaning for the “ sender,” and, during effective communication, they hopefully have the same meaning for the “ receiver.” Words are not static “ things”; they require intention and interpretation. Conversation is an interaction of symbols between individuals who constantly interpret the world around them. Of course, anything can serve as a symbol as long as it refers to something beyond itself. Written music serves as an example. The black dots and lines become more than just marks on the page; they refer to notes organized in such a way to make music. Symbolic interactionists give serious thought to how people act, and then seek to determine what meanings individuals assign to their own actions and symbols.

Applying symbolic interactionist perspective to the American institution of marriage, symbols may include wedding bands, vows of life-long commitment, a white bridal dress, a wedding cake, a Church ceremony, and flowers and music. American society attaches general meanings to these symbols, but individuals also maintain their own perceptions of what these and other symbols mean. For example, one of the spouses may see their circular wedding rings as symbolizing “ everlasting love,” while the other may see them as a financial expense.

Critics claim that the symbolic interactionist perspective neglects the macro level of social interpretation or the “ big picture.” In other words, symbolic  
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interactionists may miss the larger issues of society by focusing too closely on the “ trees” or the size of the diamond in the wedding ring rather than the “ forest” or the quality of the marriage. The perspective also receives criticism for slighting the influence of social forces and institutions on individual interactions.

All of these perspectives have valid points as well as constructive criticism that holds value. The one perspective that sticks out to me is the conflict perspective; to me this perspective is real. I think being able to identify the many things that are wrong with our society today, makes the blows less painful when something goes wrong. The conflict perspective focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. With this being said the conflict perspective can also be viewed in a positive light. Someone learning about this perspective their eyes could be opened up to many different issues that they might not necessarily experience.