

# Concepts of symbolic interactionism



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Aspects of the contemporary society of Britain, such as the Education and Religion may be explained through the use of the sociological perspectives, functionalism and symbolic interactionism. These perspectives offer contrasting insights into the inner-workings of society and are useful in attempting to understand these aspects of social life, utilizing both macrosociology; the study of widespread social processes and microsociology; the study of society at a interpersonal level.

Symbolic Interactionism is a social psychological theory devised from the work of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead that studies how individuals act within society (Symbolic Interactionism, no date). The premise of this theory is that individuals behave towards different situations based upon the meaning that the situation holds to them, from physical objects such as trees to institutions such as the government, referred to as symbols. As Symbolic Interactionism is a microsociological theory, the perspective focuses on how the meaning of these symbols to a individual is derived from the interpersonal, social interaction in society. Then through an interpretative process upon experiences, the meanings an individual holds towards symbols will change (Blumer, 1986). There are many examples where individuals find social meaning through symbolic interaction, one being that without symbolic interaction many people would not smoke; however meaning is constructed through the media or peer groups and people rationalise that albeit the consequences smoking hold, smoking is desirable.

Another social psychological concept of Symbolic Interactionism is Charles Horton Cooley's looking-glass self (1902), which explores how identity is

formed. Charles' concept states that an individual's identity grows out of interpersonal interactions, and the perception of others. This leads individuals in society to shape themselves around other people's perspectives and opinions of themselves. The looking-glass self has three main components; firstly imagining how we appear to others, secondly imagining the judgement from others of that appearance and thirdly developing our identity through these judgements (Rousseau, 2002).

Functionalism on the other hand is a macrosociological theory which originated from the works of Émile Durkheim, Functionalism is also known as a "consensus perspective" theory as the perspective does not deal with the issue of social conflict but rather at looks at the ideal in society. Durkheim's view on the functionalist perspective looks at the macro-level of social structure, the social institutions, as to explain how these contribute to the stability of society; the core institutions being: family, government, economy, media, education and religion. To a functionalist these social institutions are designed to fill the needs of society, thus shaping society, creating stability (Crossman, 2016). The functionalist perspective argues that institutions only exist to serve a role in how society functions, if the role is no longer needed the institution would not be needed either and if new needs arise in society, institutions will be created to address these roles.

As touched upon, Symbolic Interactionism is a micro-sociological theory looking at the interpersonal level of society and Functionalism is a macrosociological theory which looks at society on the structural level. The difference between the perspectives is vast due to this difference. Using religion as an example Émile Durkheim argued that religion encouraged

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individuals of society to follow the social norms which Functionalist theorists perceive as bringing about stability through institution (Emile Durkheim – the sociology of religion, no date). However as Symbolic Interactionism focuses on the micro level of society, instead of looking at religion as a institution and how it causes people to adhere to social norms, Interactionism looks at the symbolic meaning behind religion. A symbolic interactionist would observe the meanings people attach to such things as religious symbols, like a cross or a mosque, to see how they affect individual behaviour in society (Symbolic Interactionism, no date). However there are similarities between these perspectives, despite the differences as to what level of society the perspectives focus on, both theories are similar in how they group individuals together, be it through social class for functionalism and through symbols for interactionism.

Education in Britain has changed drastically since the 20th century. The Education Act was introduced in 1944 which guaranteed education for free, for every child in England and Wales. This act also divided the schools into what is the norm today, primary education and secondary education.

Throughout the 20th Century, education in Britain was a complete contrast to education in contemporary society, corporal punishment was widely used; whereas today the education system has different methods of punishment and students have rights which prevent corporal punishment such as caning. Education in contemporary Britain has evolved to be inclusive of gender and those with special educational needs as through the 20th century women and special needs were discriminated against and regarded as unintelligent. Education in contemporary Britain has also integrated the use of technology,

with the vast majority of students having access to smartphones and the like within school (Reporters, 2014)l. Education is at the forefront of modern day society with 33% of students earning a degree in 2000 in contrast to 3. 4% of students in 1950. (Bolton, no date)

Both perspectives attempt to explain this aspect of social life in contemporary Britain in contrasting ways, the Functionalist perspective focuses on the the functions performed by the education system. A functionalist may argue that Education creates Social Solidarity. Social Solidarity is when individuals feel as though they are integrated into something bigger than themselves. Durkheim's belief when it comes to education was that the system is built upon the common beliefs of individuals in society, Durkheim believed the system to be a product of collective thought rather than individual thought, therefore making the education system a expression of the collective conscious which adapts over time as society's values change, uniting society with shared values, which is known as value consensus (Hoenisch, 1996). Talcott Parsons (1961), an American functionalist which expanded upon Durkheim's writings in the 1950's and 1960's, expressed his view on the education system can be related to contemporary Britain as being useful to provide a trained labour force as, this is useful to contemporary Britain due to it being a advanced industrial economy, which needs a complex division of labour in order to sustain (Cook, 2008). Talcott Parsons (1961) also argued that the education system is the bridge between family and society as a whole for students, preparing for their role in later life after their initial primary socialisation; which is where individuals learn and develop throughout their younger years

(Agnihotri, 2008). Parsons (1961) believed that in the family, as the parents understand the unique abilities of their child, the parents will judge the child to a particular set of standards they have come to expect, this is known as particularistic standards. However due to the education system, children learn that outside of the family individuals are judged by universalistic standards, which is where rules and laws apply to all people, regardless of the character of the person, education teaches this. From a functionalist viewpoint, education in contemporary Britain is used to assign roles to people in society through the use of examinations and qualifications. Education also introduces meritocracy, which is an equality of opportunity; every student has a chance to succeed (Thompson, 2015).

An interactionist's perspective however will focus on studies on interpersonal interaction within the school, such as in the classroom, in the lunch hall and on the playground. Studies show that teachers' perception of students can affect the learning environment, A study carried out by Robert Rosenthal (1968) and Lenore Jacobson (1968) focuses on a group of students throughout a school year, at the start of the school year the teachers were told which students were intelligent and which were unintelligent. The study showed at the end of the year that the students which the teachers had been informed were "intelligent" performed better throughout the year than the students deemed "unintelligent", although the students were labelled to the teachers at random. An interactionist will look at how due to the teachers' having that knowledge inadvertently caused them to praise the "intelligent" students more often, and spend more time with them.

Interactionists will also look at how Social Interaction contributes to gender-

role socialization, studies show that teachers praise males more often (Jones & Dindia, 2004)

Functionalism is useful in understanding how the education system is more work focused in contemporary society with increasing vocational courses. The perspective allows us to see how roles are allocated in society and how the education system brings around a value consensus in society. It's also useful in understanding how society teaches children what the universalistic standards are. However Functionalism tends to look at the macro elements of the education system rather than at the interpersonal level where functionalism can be criticized due to ignoring negatives such as bullying. It can also be criticised due to the fact the Marxist perspective argues education is not meritocratic due to the fact private schools only benefit the wealthy. Symbolic Interactionism on the other hand is useful in understanding the interpersonal relationships between parties such as the teacher and the student, allowing researchers to understand how individuals behavior shape society through observations and gathering qualitative data, understanding how society come to learn gender roles and how the labelling theory works as shown in the study aforementioned; a student being given more praise makes the student believe they are intelligent and therefore tries to fit that label, which is known in sociology as the self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Manis and Meltzer (1978) Symbolic Interactionism also makes it difficult to understand on a broad level the education system in contemporary society due to being limited to only micro-social structures and that the perspective neglects emotional conduct, focusing only on logical behaviour.

Bolton, P. (no date) *Commons Briefing papers SN04252* . House of Commons.