

Structural conflict and consensus in socialization



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Explain the relevance of socialization from both the structural conflict and the structural consensus perspectives. Discuss the efficiency and the pitfalls of each approach in relation to youth work.

Both structural conflict and structural consensus theories approach the study of social life from a macro perspective, that is, both are concerned with the study of large-scale social structures, such as ideas and belief systems, and institutions, such as the family and education, in their attempts to examine and explain social life (Bilton et al. 1994: p. 10). From this perspective, a better understanding of a given society, and the relationships within it, can be gained through examining the function of social institutions and organizations in terms of the part they play in maintaining social structures within society. An example of this is the study of institutions which are agencies of socialization - for example the family and the media - to explore the part they play in the production and reproduction of social roles and values (Bilton et al. 1994: p. 12).

Socialization, then, is the process through which individuals 'learn the ways of thought and behaviour considered appropriate in [their] society' (Bilton et al. 1994: p. 12), and agencies of socialization function in both formal and informal ways to pass on to the next generation such norms of thought and behaviour. Much early socialization within the family is informal; children learn through observation and interactive experiences with siblings and adults around them the behaviour expected of themselves and others (Ibid). While there is also a degree of formal education within the family, it is within institutions such as schools that children gain much of their formal

instruction of the roles and types of behaviour expected of young people in society.

The concept of socialization is a useful one and relevant to those working in a range of professional fields, and in particular to those working with young people. This will become more apparent as we now look in more detail at the differences between the structural consensus and the structural conflict approaches.

The key difference between structural consensus and structural conflict theories is that, broadly speaking, for consensus theories the values and norms of society that people learn through the process of socialization are 'shared' by all members of society; that is, there is an agreement, or a consensus about, and commitment to, the ideas and beliefs prevalent in society among individuals (Fulcher and Scott 1999: p. 49). Conflict theories, however, argue that, rather than there being a consensus about ideas and beliefs in society, social life is fraught with conflict among different members and groups in society as they struggle with one another to attain or maintain power and control (Ibid: p. 61).

This is obviously a simplistic outline of the core tenets of both approaches; however, it may begin to be apparent from this that both perspectives' theories of socialization have potential relevance to individuals working with young people. A comparative analysis of both perspectives even at this stage reveals some of the issues encountered by formal and informal educators in this area. In relation to youth work, for example, a key issue for workers, it could be argued, is that of purpose. Is the proper purpose of

youth work, as Mark Smith (1988: p. 106) has questioned, to ' promote the welfare of individuals, serve to secure the reproduction of the means of production and existing power relations, promote community or what?'

Conflict theorists would argue that socialization of young people in areas such as youth work serves to secure existing power relations; consensus theorists would argue that it serves to promote the welfare of individuals and society as a whole.

Smith later concludes that ' informal educators should be committed [in their work practice] to that which is right rather than that which is ' correct''.

However, without a good understanding of conflict and consensus theories, it would be difficult to make judgements regarding the difference in practice between that which is ' right' or ' correct'. It will be argued later that there are, of course, limitations to the extent to which such knowledge is useful in practice, however, this essay will argue that a good understanding of the theories of socialization from the consensus and conflict perspectives can not only give us insight into issues faced by workers in this area, but also help our understanding of our own and our clients' feelings and motivations, as well as the agendas and motivations of official institutions and agencies.

The questions of purpose and motivation are, it can be argued, very important ones, and are questions into which a study of socialization from consensus and conflict perspectives can give us good insight. In the area of youth work, knowledge and understanding of the above perspectives can lead to healthy questioning of government purpose and motivation when, for example, reviewing official documents such as the DfEE 2001 consultative paper on English youth work. This paper details the government's key

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priority to help ‘keep young people in good shape’ (DfEE: 2001: p. 13). Much of what is written in terms of this priority appears to make good sense; for example ensuring young people have access to ‘a rich variety of personal growth experiences’ and helping them to make ‘informed choices [and] expand their potential’ (Ibid: pp. 13-14). However, as we shall see, closer analysis of elements of this, and indeed other, official documents and government policies reveal, when studied with knowledge of conflict and consensus theories, underlying official issues and agendas.

According to consensus theories, socialization into the cultural values and social norms of society is essential to the stability and cohesion of social structures (Fulcher and Scott 1999: p. 48). From this perspective, all individuals in society share a commitment to society’s values, ideas and beliefs. In general we all want the same things and agree that they are the right things to want, for example to secure good employment, achieve our potential, and to contribute to the community. While we may be socialized into such norms and values through formal and informal means, we nevertheless agree that they are right and just. The priorities set out in the DfEE consultative document fit closely with such ‘generally agreed’ aspirations. The document’s authors assert the need to develop ‘preventative strategies and actions which enable [young people] to make informed choices about a range of issues’ which include ‘avoiding crime, protection from drug or alcohol related dangers, preventing teenage pregnancies’ and others (DfEE 2001: p. 14). In order to make informed choices about such issues, young people will be able to discuss them with youth workers who have a key role in ‘keeping young people in good shape’

(Ibid) From a consensus perspective, the socialization of young people regarding these issues is unproblematic; society as a whole can only function effectively if all individuals are properly socialized into the agreed norms and values of society. From a conflict perspective, however, such strategies are not as unproblematic as they may at first appear.

While consensus theory sees society as being ' held together informally by norms, values and a common morality' (Ritzer 1996: p. 266) conflict theories argue that order in society stems from ' the coercion of some members by those at the top' (Ibid). As stated earlier, analysis of perspectives such as conflict theories can lead us to question the motivations behind official agenda setting, as well as those behind our own actions and those of others, and here, examining documents such as the DfEE paper, we may begin to question the motivation behind such apparently worthy intervention strategies. The question we may begin to ask, when viewing the world from a conflict perspective, is, in whose interests are the implementation of such policies and strategies? Youth workers and others working with young people do of course want to help young people to live happy and fulfilling lives, and help them to stay safe and well, however, questions can be raised as to whose primary interests some intervention strategies serve.

While the majority may well agree that a state of disorder in society is in no one's particular interest, it is clear that it is certainly in the interests of those in positions of power and advantage to maintain order through effective socialization of individuals into the values and norms of society, in particular the values and norms of society that best suit their own interests. It is, to take what may be considered a more extreme view from the conflict

perspective, far better to have good, hard-working, honest citizens paying taxes and refraining from crime, in particular property crime from persons with abundant wealth, than to have gangs of disaffected young people stealing money for drugs and falling pregnant in order to secure valuable government housing.

It may now be apparent, then, that comparative analyses of theories of socialization from the conflict and consensus perspective help give us insight and understanding when approaching issues affecting work with young people. The examples above hopefully show the efficiency of this analysis in relation to official agenda setting and policy, however, as mentioned earlier, knowledge and understanding of theories of socialization can also help workers in this area better understand issues facing themselves and their clients. An awareness of whose interests are being served in relation to practice performed by workers with their clients can only work to ensure continued practice evaluation. An understanding of the conflicts in values and norms which many young people may encounter can help workers when making judgements within their own practice with regards to what is 'right' as opposed to 'correct'.

One example of the above could be the possible conflict experienced by young people between the values and goals seen by individuals around them, and perhaps by the young people themselves, as fair and just, and the means available to them to embrace such values or achieve such goals. Sociologist R. K. Merton's (1938) theory of anomie addresses this experience of conflict, and suggests that if a society places great emphasis on achieving goals, and less on the appropriate means to obtain them, then an

individual's 'commitment to approved means - and therefore conformity to social norms - may be eroded' (Fulcher and Scott 1999: p. 49). Merton argues that the rift between culturally approved ends, and the means of attaining them, which he refers to as a situation of anomie, can result in individuals resorting to inappropriate means to achieve goals which they, along with the rest of society, agree are worthy. Here individuals have been effectively socialised into the norms and values of appropriate goal attainment, but not so successfully into the appropriate means by which to obtain them. From a conflict perspective, however, it could be argued that the social values placed on goal attainment, and passed on through socialization, do not necessarily serve the best interests of all members of society in the first place. The goal, for example, of buying a large house in an expensive neighbourhood will simply put more revenue the government's way in terms of council tax than will a smaller property, as well as more revenue to mortgage companies, power suppliers and so on.

This essay has hopefully shown the relevance, and in the areas discussed, the efficiency of structural conflict and structural consensus perspectives in relation to youth work, however, as stated earlier there are obvious limitations to the extent to which such theories are of use in practice, not least because theories, while helpful, are more usefully conceptualised as tools to stimulate thought and discussion relating to policy and good practice. Finally, all theory is limited because the number of variables present in any given situation means that no theory can simply be taken as a model and then applied.

Bibliography

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