1.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Culture

The social structure plays an integral role in the social location (i.e., place or position) people occupy in society. Your social location is a result of cultural values and norms from the time-period and place in which you live. Culture effects personal and social development including the way people will think or behave. Cultural characteristics pertaining to age, gender, race, education, income and other social factors influence the location people occupy at any given time.

Furthermore, social location influences how people perceive and understand the world in which we live. People have a difficult time being objective in all contexts because of their social location within cultural controls and standards derived from values and norms. Objective conditions exist without bias because they are measureable and quantifiable (Carl 2013). Subjective concerns rely on judgments rather than external facts. Personal feelings and opinions from a person’s social location drive subjective concerns. The sociological imagination is a tool to help people step outside subjective or personal biography, and look at objective facts and the historical background of a situation, issue, society, or person (Carl 2013).

PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY

The time period we live (history) and our personal life experiences (biography) influence our perspectives and understanding about others and the world. Our history and biography guide our perceptions of reality reinforcing our personal bias and subjectivity. Relying on subjective viewpoints and perspectives leads to diffusion of misinformation and fake news that can be detrimental to our physical and socio-cultural environment and negatively impact our interactions with others. We must seek out facts and develop knowledge to enhance our objective eye. By using valid, reliable, proven facts, data, and information, we establish credibility and make better decisions for the world and ourselves.

1. Consider a socio-cultural issue you are passionate about and want to change or improve.
2. What is your position on the issue? What ideological or value-laden reasons or beliefs support your position? What
3. What portion of your viewpoint or perspective on the issue relies on personal values, opinions, or beliefs in comparison to facts?

4. Why is it important to identify and use empirical data or facts in our lives rather than relying on ideological reasoning and false or fake information?

According to C. Wright Mills (1959), the sociological imagination requires individuals to “think themselves away” in examining personal and social influences on people’s life choices and outcomes. Large-scale or macrosociological influences help create understanding about the effect of the social structure and history on people’s lives. Whereas, small-scale or microsociological influences focus on interpreting personal viewpoints from an individual’s biography. Using only a microsociological perspective leads to an unclear understanding of the world from bias perceptions and assumptions about people, social groups, and society (Carl 2013).

**Figure 1**: Selective Focus Photography of Woman Using White and Black SLR Camera. Image used with permission (CC BY 4.0; Element5 Digital).

Sociologists use theories to study the people. “The theoretical paradigms provide different lenses into the social constructions of life and the relationships of people” (Kennedy, Norwood, and Jendian 2017:22). The theoretical paradigms in sociology help us examine and understand cultural reflections including the social structure and social value culture creates and sustains to fulfill human needs as mediated by society itself. Each paradigm provides an objective framework of analysis and evaluation for understanding the social structure including the construction of the cultural values and norms and their influence on thinking and behavior.

**Theoretical Paradigms**

**Macrosociology** studies large-scale social arrangements or constructs in the social world. The macro perspective examines how groups, organizations, networks, processes, and systems influences thoughts and actions of individuals and groups (Kennedy et al. 2017). Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Feminism, and Environmental Theory are macrosociological perspectives.

**Microsociology** studies the social interactions of individuals and groups. The micro perspective observes how thinking and behavior influences the social world such as groups, organizations, networks, processes, and systems (Kennedy et
Symbolic Interactionism and Exchange Theory are microsociological perspectives. **Functionalism** is a macrosociological perspective examining the purpose or contributions of interrelated parts within the social structure. Functionalist examine how parts of society contribute to the whole. Everything in society has a purpose or function. Even a negative contribution helps society discern its function. For example, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs inspired society to define the behavior as undesirable, develop laws, and consequences for people committing such an act. A manifest function in society results in expected outcomes (i.e., using a pencil to develop written communication). Whereas, a latent function has an unexpected result (i.e., using a pencil to stab someone). When a function creates unexpected results that cause hardships, problems, or negative consequences the result is a latent dysfunction.

**Conflict Theory** is a macrosociological perspective exploring the fight among social groups over resources in society. Groups compete for status, power, control, money, territory, and other resources for economic or other social gain. Conflict Theory explores the struggle between those in power and those who are not in power within the context of the struggle. Cultural wars are common in society, whether controversy over a deity and way of life or ownership and rights over Holy Land.

**Symbolic Interactionism** is a microsociological perspective observing the influence of interactions on thinking and behavior. Interactionists consider how people interpret meaning and symbols to understand and navigate the social world. Individuals create social reality through verbal and non-verbal interactions. These interactions form thoughts and behaviors in response to others influencing motivation and decision-making. Hearing or reading a word in a language one understands develop a mental image and comprehension about information shared or communicated (i.e., the English word “bread” is most commonly visualized as a slice or loaf and considered a food item).

There are three modern approaches to sociological theory (Carl 2013). **Feminism**, a macrosociological perspective, studies the experiences of women and minorities in the social world including the outcomes of inequality and oppression for these groups. One major focus of the feminist theoretical approach is to understand how age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and social class interact with gender to determine outcomes for people (Carl 2013). **Exchange Theory** examines decision-making of individuals in society. This microsociological perspective focuses on understanding how people consider a cost versus benefit analysis accentuating their self-interest to make decisions. **Environmental Theory** explores how people adjust to ecological (environmental and social) changes over time (Carl 2013). The focal point of this macro-sociological perspective is to figure out how people adapt or evolve over time and share the same ecological space.

**Applying Theories**

Functionals view how people work together to create society as a whole. From this perspective, societies need culture to exist (Griffiths, Keirns, Strayer, Cody-Rydzewsk, Scaramuzzo, Sadler, Vyain, Byer, and Jones 2015). For example, cultural norms or rules function to support the social structure of society, and cultural values guide people in their thoughts and actions. Consider how education is an important concept in the United States because it is valued. The culture of education including the norms surrounding registration, attendance, grades, graduation, and material culture (i.e., classrooms, textbooks, libraries) all support the emphasis placed on the value of education in the United States. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill the needs or society, culture exists to meet the basic needs.
of its members.

Conflict theorists understand the social structure as inherently unequal resulting from the differences in power based on age, class, education, gender, income, race, sexuality, and other social factors. For a conflict theorist, culture reinforces issues of "privilege" groups and their status in social categories (Griffiths et al. 2015). Inequalities exist in every cultural system. Therefore, cultural norms benefit people with status and power while harming others and at the expense of others. For example, although cultural diversity is valued in the United States, some people and states prohibit interracial marriages, same-sex marriages, and polygamy (Griffiths et al. 2015).

Symbolic interactionists see culture as created and maintained by the interactions and interpretations of each other’s actions. These theorists conceptualize human interactions as a continuous process of deriving meaning from the physical and social environment. “Every object and action has a symbolic meaning, and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate their interpretations of these meanings to others” (Griffiths et al. 2015:72). Interactionists evaluate how culture depends on the interpretation of meaning and how individuals interact when exchanging comprehension and meaning. For example, derogatory terms such as the “N” word might be acceptable among people of the same cultural group but viewed as offensive and antagonistic when used by someone outside of the group.

Feminists explore the cultural experiences of women and minorities. For example, women in Lebanon do not have the right to dissolve a marriage without her husband’s consent even in cases of spousal abuse (Human Rights Watch 2015). Feminism explicitly examines oppression structures within culture systems and the inequity some groups confront in relation to their age, gender, race, social class, sexuality, or other social category.

Exchange theorists observe how culture influences decision-making. Cultural values and beliefs often influence people’s choices about premarital sex and cohabitation before marriage. If you evaluate your decisions on a daily basis, you might see elements of culture behind the motivation driving your choices.

Environmental theorists assess how culture, as part of the social and physical environment, adapts and changes over time. If you contemplate any rule of law, you can see how culture has altered because of shifts in social ideas or ecological fluctuations. Consider the anti-tobacco laws in the United States making it illegal to smoke in public areas as an example of social shifts towards health and wellness or water meters to control and regulate residential water usage and waste as an example of ecological drought and prolonged water shortages in the United States.

THEORETICAL APPLICATION

Popular culture reflects prominent values, beliefs, norms, symbolic expressions, and practices while re-enforcing American ideologies and myths. Develop a written response exploring the depiction of contemporary American culture in an episode of a contemporary television show drama (i.e., NCIS, Game of Thrones, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Breaking Bad, etc.)

1. Describe American cultural ideologies or principles portrayed in the show (i.e., unity, diversity, patriotism, etc.).
2. Explain which myths or untruths are evident in the film that express fundamental cultural values or norms.
3. Discuss how the show mirrors social and cultural trends.
4. Analyze the culture portrayed in the television show using each of the theoretical paradigms: Functionalism, Conflict theory, Interactionism, Feminism, Exchange Theory, and Environmental Theory.

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