2.2: Theoretical Approaches

Paradigms are theoretical frameworks explaining society (Griffiths et al. 2015). These frameworks are perspectives, a way of observing and examining people and the world through different lenses. As a sociological practitioner, you must learn to use and apply sociological theories to understand and evaluate people and their social situations or conditions from an objective viewpoint to identify appropriate interventions.

Sociologists use theories to study and understand people. “The theoretical paradigms provide different lenses into the social constructions of life and the relationships of people” (Kennedy, Norwood, and Jendian 2017:22). In using the sociological eye, each theoretical paradigm helps remove bias in assessing people and social issues at all levels of analysis (macro, meso, and micro). There are three major paradigms in the field of sociology: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Functionalism and conflict theory examine society on macro and meso levels. Symbolic interactionism investigates micro level interactions in society. There are also three modern or emerging paradigms in sociology: feminism, exchange theory, and environmental theory. Feminism and environmental analyze macro and meso levels. Exchange theory focuses on micro level analysis.
Functionalism is a macrosociological perspective examining the purpose or contributions of interrelated parts within the social structure. Functionalists 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 unexpected results (i.e., using a pencil to stab someone). When a function creates unexpected results that cause social hardships or negative consequences the result is defined as a latent dysfunction.

Conflict Theory is a macrosociological perspective exploring the competition among social groups over resources in society. Groups compete for status, power, control, money, territory, and other resources for economic or social gain. Conflict Theory explores the struggle between those in power and those absent of power within a social context of struggle. The cultural war over immigration in the United States with competing groups representing open versus closed border ideologies is an example.

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, results in a mental image and comprehension about the 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 intersect 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 motivation and self-interest in making decisions. Environmental Theory explores how people adjust to ecological, both environmental and social, changes over time (Carl 2013). The focal point of this macrosociological perspective is to figure out how people adapt or evolve over time in response to ecological space or context.
Applying Theories

Functionalists examine how people work together to create society as a whole. From this perspective, societies need systems, policies, processes, and institutions to exist (Griffiths et al. 2015). For example, policies or laws function to support the social structure of society, and values and norms guide people in their thoughts and actions. Consider how education is an important concept in the United States because it is valued. Educational institutions including the policies and norms surrounding registration, attendance, grades, graduation, and materials (i.e., classrooms, textbooks, libraries) all support the emphasis placed on the value of education in the United States. By observing people using functionalism, we study how members of a society work together by investigating how social systems, policies, processes, and institutions meet the needs of social networks, communities, organizations, and groups.

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, society reinforces issues of "privilege" groups and their status in social categories (Griffiths et al. 2015). Inequalities exist in every social system. Therefore, social 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). By applying conflict theory, we investigate the dynamics of power among and between social systems, policies, processes, institutions networks, communities, organizations, and groups.

Symbolic interactionists study the thoughts and actions of individuals through the expression of social interactions between them. These theorists conceptualize human interactions as a continuous process derived from the interpretation and meaning of 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 people depend on the interpretation of meaning and how individuals interact when exchanging comprehension and meaning. For instance, 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. When sociological practitioners apply symbolic interactionism, they identify the implication words and symbols including tone, body language, and labels that influence thinking and behavior.
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Feminism explores the lives and experiences of women and minorities. For example, a woman in Lebanon does 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 oppressive structures within systems, policies, and the inequity of institutions and groups in relation to age, gender, race, social class, sexuality, or other social category. The application of feminism in sociological practice notes the circumstances and effects of oppression resulting from social systems, policies, processes, and institutions on networks, communities, organizations, or social groups.

Exchange theorists observe how society and social interactions influence decision-making. Social values and beliefs often influence people’s attitudes, judgments, or actions. Sociological practitioners apply exchange theory to evaluate people’s decisions to see the social forces motivating or driving people’s thinking, behavior, and choices.

Environmental theorists assess how people, as part of the social and physical environment, adapt and change over time. If you contemplate any rule of law, you can see how society 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 spaces 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. Application of environmental theory uncovers the social and environmental influences of change or areas encountering change in social systems, policies, process, institutions, networks, communities, organizations, and groups.

HARNESSING UNDERSTANDING ABOUT SOCIAL CONDITIONS

1. Review the organizational information you researched and assessed the Levels of Analysis exercise.

2. Analyze the organization using each of the theoretical paradigms: Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Interactionism, Feminism, Exchange Theory, and Environmental Theory.

3. Now, analyze the clientele or population served by the organization using each of paradigms: Functionalism, Conflict Theory, Interactionism, Feminism, Exchange Theory, and Environmental Theory.