10.5C: The Interactionist Perspective

Learning Objectives

- Describe how the interactionalist perspective views race and ethnicity

Following founding symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer claimed that people interact with each other by attaching meaning to each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to them. Human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols and signification, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions. One of the most influential symbolic interactionist theorists on race and ethnic relations was Robert Park. Evolving out of the mid-20th century “Chicago School” of urban sociology, Park created the term human ecology, which borrowed the concepts of symbiosis, invasion, succession, and dominance from the science of natural ecology.
George Herbert Mead: George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) was an American philosopher, sociologist, and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he was one of several distinguished pragmatists. He is regarded as one of the founders of social psychology and the American sociological tradition in general.

Using the city of Chicago as an example, he proposed that cities were environments like those found in nature. Park and fellow sociologist Ernest Burgess suggested that cities were governed by many of the same forces of Darwinian evolution evident in ecosystems. They felt the most significant force was competition. Competition was created by groups fighting for urban resources, like land, which led to a division of urban space into ecological niches. Within these niches people shared similar social characteristics because they were subject to the same ecological pressure.

This theory served as a foundation for his influential theory of racial assimilation known as the “race relation cycle”. The cycle has four stages: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. The first step is contact, followed by competition. Then, after some time, a hierarchical arrangement can prevail—one of accommodation—in which one race is dominant and others dominated. In the end assimilation occurs. Park declared that it is “a cycle of events which tends everywhere to repeat itself,” also seen in other social processes.

Key Points

- Robert Park, one of the most influential symbolic interactionist theorists on race and ethnic relations, formed his view on race and ethnicity —“human ecology,” he called it—by drawing on natural ecology.
- Park’s theory of the race relation cycle includes four stages: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation.
- Park declared that race relations entail “a cycle of events which tends everywhere to repeat itself,” also be seen in other social processes.
Key Terms

- **Race Relation Cycle**: A model of urban race relations consisting of a cycle with four stages: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation.

- **Human Ecology**: Urban sociologist Robert Park’s model of urban life, which borrowed concepts from symbiosis, invasion, succession, and dominance from the science of natural ecology.

- **Robert Park**: An urban sociologist from the Chicago School of Sociology who was one of the most influential symbolic interactionist theorists on race and ethnic relations.