

Sociological theory

Introduction

Sociologists develop theories to explain social phenomena. A *theory* is a proposed relationship between two or more *concepts*. In other words, a theory is explanation for why or how a phenomenon occurs.

Sociological theory is developed at multiple levels, ranging from *grand theory* to highly contextualized and specific *micro-range theories*. There are many *middle-range* and *micro-range* theories in sociology. Because such theories are dependent on context and specific to certain situations, it is beyond the scope of this text to explore each of those theories.

Prominent Sociological Theories

As noted above, there are many theories in sociology. However, there are several broad theoretical perspectives that are prominent in the field (they are arguably paradigms). These theories are prominent because they are quite good at explaining social life. They are not without their problems, but these theories remain widely used and cited precisely because they have withstood a great deal of criticism.

Structural functionalism

Structural-Functionalism is a sociological theory that originally attempted to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual biological needs (originally just *functionalism*). Later it came to focus on the ways social institutions meet social needs (structural-functionalism). structural-functionalism draws its inspiration primarily from the ideas of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim was concerned with the question of how societies maintain internal stability and survive over time. He sought to explain social cohesion and stability through the concept of solidarity. In more "primitive" societies it was mechanical solidarity, everyone performing similar tasks, that held society together. Durkheim proposed that such societies tend to be segmentary, being composed of equivalent parts that are held together by shared values, common symbols, or systems of exchanges. In modern, complex societies members perform very different tasks, resulting in a strong interdependence between individuals. Based on the metaphor of an organism in which many parts function together to sustain the

whole, Durkheim argued that modern complex societies are held together by organic solidarity (think interdependent *organs*)

Conflict theory

A prominent sociological theory that is often contrasted with structural-functionalism is **conflict theory**. Karl Marx is considered the father of conflict theory. Conflict theory argues that society is not best understood as a complex system striving for equilibrium but rather as a competition. Society is made up of individuals competing for limited resources (e.g., money, leisure, sexual partners, etc.). Broader social structures and organizations (e.g., religions, government, etc.) reflect the competition for resources in their inherent inequalities; some people and organizations have more resources (i.e., power and influence) and use those resources to maintain their positions of power in society.

Symbolic interaction

In contrast to the rather broad approach toward society of structural-functionalism and conflict theory, **Symbolic Interactionism** is a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between humans and society. The basic notion of symbolic interactionism is that human action and interaction are understandable only through the exchange of meaningful communication or symbols. In this approach, humans are portrayed as *acting* as opposed to being *acted upon*.