**Major Theoretical Perspective in Sociology**

Sociology as science employs perspectives or theories to understand, explain, analyze and interpret social phenomena. To interpret social facts, they must be subjected to a theoretical framework. A theory may be defined as a general statement about how some parts of the world fit together and how they work (Macionis, 1997). Scupin and DeCorse (1995) define a theory as a set of interconnected hypotheses that offer general explanations for natural or social phenomena.

It should also be noted that the terms “perspectives” and “schools of thought” are often used interchangeably with the term “theory”.

There are three major theoretical perspectives in sociology that have provided an overall framework for sociological studies. These are structural functionalism, social conflict theory and symbolic interactionism. There are also theories that have emerged challenging these major ones (see below).

**The Structural-Functionalist Theory**

This is one of the dominant theories both in anthropology and sociology. It is sometimes called functionalism. The theory tries to explain how the relationships among the parts of society are created and how these parts are functional (meaning having beneficial consequences to the individual and the society) and dysfunctional (meaning having negative consequences). It focuses on consensus, social order, structure and function in society.

The structural-functionalist theory sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability; it states that our social lives are guided by social structure, which are relatively stable patterns of social behavior (Macionis, 1997). Social structure is understood in terms of social function, which are consequences for the operations of society. All social structure contributes to the operation of society. The major terms and concepts developed by anthropologists and sociologists in this theory include (or the theory focuses on): order, structure, function (manifest or direct functions and latent or hidden, indirect functions), and equilibrium.

Those hold this view ask such questions as: what hold society together? What keeps it steady? The Structural- functionalist theory pays considerable attention to the persistence of shared ideas in society. The functional aspect in the structural-functionalist theory stresses the role played by each component part in the social system, whereas the structural perspective suggests an image of society wherein individuals are constrained by the social forces, social backgrounds and by group memberships.

Many of the great early founding sociologists such as August Comte, Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer and later American sociologists like Talkot Parsons and Robert K Merton. Structural -functionalist theorists in modern sociology are more likely to follow in the tradition of the writings of particularly Emile Durkheim, who is regarded as the pioneering proponent of this perspective (Hensiln and Nelson, 1995).

After dominating sociology and anthropology for a long time, this theory was challenged by its main critics, notably those who proposed the social –conflict theory (see below). The theory was attacked for its emphasis on stability and order while neglecting conflict and changes which so vital in any society.

**The Social Conflict Theory**

This theory is also called Marxism; to indicate that the main impetus to the theory derives from the writings of Karl Marx This theory sees society in a framework of class conflicts and focuses on the struggle for scarce resources by different groups in a given society. It asks such questions as what pulls society apart. How does society change? The theory holds that the most important aspect of social order is the domination of some group by others, that actual or potential conflicts are always present in society. The writings of Karl Marx are generally in the spirit of conflict theory, and Marxism influences most of conflict theorists in modern sociology.

The theory is useful in explaining how the dominant groups use their power to exploit the less powerful groups in society. Key concepts developed in this perspective include: conflict, complementation, struggle, power, inequality, and exploitation.

Although this theory gained fame in recent decades, it came under sharp criticism, for its overemphasis on inequality and division, for neglecting the fact of how shared values and interdependence generate unity among members of society; it is also criticized for its explicit political goals. Another critique, which equally applies also to structural functionalism, is that it sees society in very broad terms, neglecting micro-level social realities (Macionis 1997).

**Symbolic Interactionism**

This theory was advanced by such American sociologists as Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929) William I Thomas (1863-1947) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) in early 20th century. This perspective views symbols as the basis of social life. Symbols are things to which we attach meanings. The theory stresses the analysis of how our behaviors depend on how we define others and ourselves. It concentrates on process, rather than structure, and keeps the individual actor at the center. According to symbolic interactionism, the essence of social life and social reality is the active human being trying to make sense of social situations. In short, this theory calls attention to the detailed, person-oriented processes that take place within the larger units of social life (Calhoun et al, 1994; Henslin and Nelson, 1996; Soroka, 1995).

As indicated above, there are contemporary sociological theories that have emerged in recent decades that have heavily influenced sociological and anthropological thinking. These include the following:

**Feminism**

This theory takes as its central theme the place and facts of women’s underprivileged status and their exploitation in a patriarchally dominated society. Feminist sociology focuses on the particular disadvantages, including oppression and exploitation faced by women in society. This theory ranges from **liberal feminism**, which recognizes inequalities but believes that reform can take place without a fundamental restructuring of the social system, to **radical feminism**, which advocates the fundamental need for societal change.

**Social Exchange Theory**

This theory focuses on “the costs and benefits which people obtain in social interaction, including money, goods, and status. It is based on the principle that people always act to maximize benefit. However, to receive benefits, there must always be an exchange process with others”.

**Public Choice Theory:** This theory states that collective organizations such as political parties act rationally to maximize their own benefits. It argues that individual differences are best resolved by collective involvement within organizations. The role of the state is important in arbitrating between large-scale interests (Ibid, same page).

**Rational Choice Theory:** This theory assumes that individuals will operate in rational way and will seek to benefit themselves in the life choices they make.

**Structuralism**

This theory denies any basis for humans being active, since human consciousness is no longer seen as the basis of meaning in language. Structuralism differs from the mainstream traditional theories in that it rejects objective social facts and a concept of society as an objective, external entity. It defines social reality in terms of the relations between events, not in terms of things and social facts. Its basic principle is that the observable is meaningful only in so far as it can be related to an underlying structure or order.

The equivalent of structuralism in anthropology, advanced by its famous French structuralist anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, states that “the origin of universal principles that order the ways in which we behave and think about the world is to be found in the structure of human thought.”(Howard and DunaifHattis, 1992:373). The problem with this theory is that they view societies as static and do not help very much in explaining variation among societies. The theory treats culture as a given order and fails to explain the adaptive dimensions of culture.

**Post-Structuralism and Post-modernism:**

**Post –structuralism:**

Focuses on the power of language in constructing knowledge and identity. The writers in this field have emphasized the role of language in human life, how language dictates the thoughts we have, and how it constructs meanings for us. Poststructuralists argue that humans cannot arrive anything they can confidently call the (universal) truth. There is no link between the words (language) ideas, and the real world. It denies the sociological idea that our concepts have some relationship to the real world. It is not possible to arrive at a sociological truth, and such attempts are dangerous.

**Post-modernism:**

The basis of post-modernism was post-structuralism. Post-modernism is defined as a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon which mainly rejects order and progress, objective and universal truth; and supports the need for recognizing and tolerating different forms of reality. It tends to celebrate chaos and disorder, diversity and fragmentation in the modern global society rather than wanting to achieve order. This theory maintains that there is no ultimate reason in human life and existence (Bliton, et al. 1996; Kirby, et al. 2000). Postmodernists argue, “Power has become decentralized and fragmented in contemporary societies“ (Torres and Mitchel, 1998). The theorists of post- structuralism share a lost with post-modernists.

A note on applying sociological theories to health, culture and society may be important here. Each of he above sociological theories may have its own views on medicine and society. But for the sake of brevity, I would just focus on the three major theories:

• Structural functionalism: the version of this theory as applied to medicine ad society may be termed as the “medical ecological approach. The structural functionalist theory views medicine and the systems of health care as important social institutions; and it focuses on the functions and roles played by the institution in maintaining odder and stability in society. The medical institutions whether scientific or traditional and the various practitioners exist to meet the needs of individuals and society (Henslin and Nelson, 1995).

• Symbolic interactionist theory: This theory as applied to medicine and society may be termed as the”cultural interpretationist approach. This approach focuses on the social and cultural constructions of health, illness and disease.

According to this theory, illnesses and health are not just things that exist “out there”; they are productions of the complex social interactions; and health and illness are highly shaped by the manner in which people as actors give meanings to them and how the actors respond to them in socio-culturally sanctioned ways.

• Conflict theory: The equivalent of this theory in medical sociology and anthropology may be termed as “the critical” or “radical political economy” approach. It is an approach which stresses on the socio-economic inequality in power and wealth which in turn significantly affects the health status and access to health care facilities. Individuals, groups, communities and even nations thus tend to have unbalanced share of health resources; and these often leads to the unequal distribution of morbidity and mortality patterns among a given society; those in power and dominance enjoy better health and the marginalized groups suffer from the burden of diseases.

**The Significance of Learning Sociology**

Generally, learning sociology provides us with what sociologists call the sociological imagination. Sociological imagination is a particular way of looking at the world around us through sociological lenses. It is a way of looking at our experiences in light of what is going on in the social world around us. This helps us to appreciate the social and non-biological forces that affect, influence and shape our lives as individuals, groups, and communities (Giddens, 1982). Sociological imagination helps us look beyond individual psychology to the many and varied facets of social and cultural forces, and "the recurring patterns in peoples' attitudes and actions, and how these patterns vary across time, cultures and social groups." (Henslin and Nelson, 1995)

Learning sociology helps us understand how social forces influence our goals, attitudes, behavior, and personality. We become more sensitive towards the social issues. Furthermore, learning sociology helps to cast aside our own biased assumptions, stereotypes and ethno-centric thinking and practices to become more critical, broad- minded and respectful in our interpersonal and inter- group relationships. By learning sociology, we can be more humane and people – centered; we give high value to human dignity.

In general, sociology increases our self-knowledge. Learning sociology can provide us with self enlightenment. When we learn sociology, we gain more knowledge about the conditions of our own lives, and about the way our society and social system function. As such knowledge increases, we can be more empowered to influence the direction of forces and circumstances that affect our lives. We can also be more responsive to the various policies set by governments; and can suggest our own policy initiatives and alternatives (Giddens, op cit). In addition to the aforementioned theoretical benefits, sociology has certain practical benefits. There is what we call applied sociology, the application of sociological knowledge, principles, methods, concepts and theories to provide the solutions to the contemporary social pathologies. Sociology plays practical roles to tackle social pathologies.

Sociological knowledge is highly applicable in dealing with today's most crucial social problems, and in facilitating developmental activities in socioeconomic sectors.

Before closing this section, it is important to note why health/ medical sciences students need to take a course in introductory sociology. The following are some of the arguments for the necessity of such a course:

**1.** Health, disease and illness are as much sociocultural in their nature as they are physical.

**2.** So far, despite certain steps being taken, the dominant trend in the medical/ health sciences training is to highly focus on the biomedical and ecological dimensions of health and disease. However, given the bio-psycho-social nature of human being and health, this is very partial. This restricted approach to health disease does not provide the students with appropriate and whole picture about the issue. Such highly narrow focus in the training of heath professionals and design of health policies and strategies is not appropriate.

**3.** In the objective realties of developing societies such as Ethiopia human health and well-being are deeply linked to sociocultural factors such as the entrenched poverty, the roles of traditional values and institutions in shaping people’s worldviews about health and disease.