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## 2

## UNDERSTANDING THEORY

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### LEARNING QUESTIONS

- 2.1 What is structural functionalism?
- 2.2 What is a conflict perspective?
- 2.3 What is symbolic interaction?
- 2.4 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Children often will try on another person's glasses. Sometimes they will see worse—things look out of focus and fuzzy—but other times, they will see better. Imagining theory as a pair of glasses we put on to look at the social world can be a helpful metaphor. A theory can help us see some aspects of society more clearly while obscuring others.

Sociologists develop and use **theories**, explanations for various social patterns within society. Groups of theories that share much in common are what sociologists call **theoretical perspectives**. This chapter focuses on the three main theoretical perspectives in sociology—structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction—and how each of them “sees” or explains the social world.

## UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

### LEARNING QUESTION

#### 2.1 What is structural functionalism?

The view of modern societies as consisting of interdependent parts working together for the good of the whole is known as **structural functionalism**. Individuals work for the larger society's interests, rather than their own, because of social solidarity, or the unwritten rules and values that govern societies. Families, religion, education, and other institutions teach individuals to help society function smoothly.

### Durkheim and Types of Societies

Émile Durkheim, writing in the early 1900s, examined social solidarity throughout history. In smaller, preindustrial societies, social solidarity derived from the similarity of its members, what Durkheim referred to as mechanical solidarity. Most did similar types of labor (working the land) and had similar beliefs (based on religion).

As societies evolved, science gained predominance over religion, and jobs became differentiated during the industrial era; a different type of solidarity, an organic solidarity, formed. These societies operated more like a living organism, with various parts, each specializing in only certain tasks but dependent on the others for survival (e.g., the circulatory system and the digestive system perform different functions, but if one does not do its job, the other will not survive). Durkheim argued that for a society based on organic solidarity to be “healthy” (i.e., in social harmony and in order), all the “parts” of the society had to be working well together, in an interconnected way, just as in a human body. Thus, sociologists who use this theoretical perspective tend to focus on social harmony and social order. They often overlook issues such as conflict and inequality. Instead, structural functionalists emphasize the role of the major social institutions and how they help provide stability to society.

### Social Institutions

What are **social institutions**? They are sets of statuses and roles focused around one central aspect of society (think of social institutions as similar to the different organ systems in a human body). A status is the position a person occupies in a particular institution. For example, you occupy the status position of college student. But you are also a son or daughter, a former high school student, and a member of many other groups. So, you have multiple status positions. A role is composed of the many behaviors that go into occupying a status. So, part of your role as a college student is to come to class on time and prepared. If sociologists were to examine the educational institution as a whole, they would have a macro-level focus. If, however, they were to look at how you and your friends fill the role of college students, they would be working at the **micro level of analysis**.

## HOW I GOT ACTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY

KATHLEEN S. LOWNEY

I went to college knowing that I wanted to study religion. But then I took Introduction to Sociology—799 other students and me (yes, the course had 800 students!)—and I was hooked. Learning about structure, agency, and sociological theories gave me a language and intellectual framework to see the social world that I still use today. So on the third day of that first quarter of college, I added sociology as another major. The questions that consume me still focus on the intersection of religion and sociology, be they about the new religion I studied for my doctoral dissertation or for the past 19 years when I have studied adolescent Satanism. I welcome each of you to the study of the academic discipline that I love.

The statuses individuals occupy and the roles they play come together to form the unique social structure of a group, an organization, an institution, or a society. Once the group becomes large enough, social institutions form around accomplishing the tasks central to the survival of the group. Thus, while social institutions are made up of individuals fulfilling their roles, they are much more than these individuals—they are societal in nature. When sociologists examine large-scale social structures, like institutions, they use a **macro level of analysis**.

Structural functionalists note that there are seven primary social institutions: family, religion, economy, education, government, health care, and media. These seven institutions cover nearly all the major aspects of a modern society. Each social institution fulfills tasks on behalf of society. Structural functionalism calls these tasks functions. There are two types of functions. Let's talk about them one at a time.

### Manifest Functions

The obvious, stated reasons that a social institution exists are known as **manifest functions**. Structural functionalists maintain that manifest functions of each institution fulfill necessary tasks in society. For example, let's look at the social institution of the family. One function the family performs is to encourage individuals to procreate—to have children. Otherwise, a society would likely die after one



Studying is an important part of your role as a student.

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generation, wouldn't it? So, a manifest function of the family institution in any society is reproduction. But institutions can have more than one manifest function. Families are also responsible for raising and instructing their children. For example, families teach children the cultural norms (rules for behavior) and values of their particular society, a process known as socialization.

Consider education as a social institution. What tasks does the education institution do for society? It teaches those in school the knowledge that society says is important to know to become a contributing adult member of that society. In the United States today, that includes grammar, spelling, mathematics, U.S. and world history, and basic computer skills.

### Latent Functions

Manifest functions are only the first type of function structural functionalists use to examine the social world. They also use latent functions. **Latent functions** are good or useful things that a social institution does but are not the institution's reason for existing.

Let's return to the family institution for a moment. We know that its manifest function is to reproduce and then socialize children, so that the society can continue indefinitely into the future. But family as a social institution supports the society in many other ways. Families help the economic institution, for example, when they purchase food or school supplies or pay rent or buy a house. Helping the economy is a good thing, but it is not a family's core function.

Latent functions almost always link to a second social institution (e.g., both family and education support the economic institution). These connections between one social institution and another build the social harmony structural functionalists see when they look at society.

Sometimes behavioral patterns have unintended negative consequences, called **dysfunctions**. For example, the United States built the interstate highway system to move people and products more quickly from location to location, which helps the economic institution. But that good idea also led to an increase in air pollution (a dysfunction) because more people purchased cars and chose to drive, because highways made it so much easier to get to and from places in a car.

### Seeing the Social World Using Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism is a macro-theoretical perspective. It looks at society as a whole and focuses on the institutions, rather than individuals, within it. When they put on structural functionalism's glasses, sociologists view society from a distance and look for social order and harmony.

In looking at the big picture of society, functionalist sociologists focus less on discrete individuals and their daily lives and interactions with one another and more on social institutions and how they fit together to build social harmony and stability. So, for example, structural functionalists study the institution of the family, not individual families, to learn how social institutions function to meet societal needs. Although particular families may not fulfill each of the functions, as a social institution, the family can and must carry out certain functions in order for society to function smoothly. By concentrating on social institutions, structural functionalism rises above the unique ways millions of families go about their daily lives of cooking, taking out the garbage, cleaning up after each other, loving one another, raising children, and so on to focus on the vital role society assigns to the institution of family—to birth and then socialize children.

Using the structural functionalist lens, sociologists see that social institutions construct stability and order. In large part, this is because several institutions (e.g., family, religion, education) cooperate to socialize each of us into adhering to the same set of cultural norms and values. Thus, American drivers stay on the right side of the road, we stop at stop signs, we more or less follow the speed limit, and so on. We also don't rob banks or commit murder. Put differently, most citizens of a society are "good" people who follow the social norms.

### Curbing Violations of Social Norms

But what about an individual who chooses to act against those shared cultural norms? How does structural functionalism see that person? First and foremost, that person—for whatever reason—is violating social norms. Perhaps that person's parents failed to properly teach their children society's norms. Or

the person may know the norms but consider them unfair (see Chapter 6). Or perhaps the person might simply be selfish and putting their needs ahead of what is best for society.

So, let's talk about a bank robber for a moment. They should have learned from family, teachers, and perhaps religious leaders that robbing a bank is not socially acceptable behavior. But despite those socializing messages, the person still chose to rob a bank. The person has stepped outside of the moral order of the community and must be punished (once caught, of course). But why? Why is punishment needed? Structural functionalist theorists believe that punishment is required for at least two reasons. First, accepting one's punishment is a step in the rehabilitation and resocialization process of the individual back into the community (if deemed possible). Second, structural functionalist theorists, building on the sociological work of Émile Durkheim, also worry that without punishment, "bad" behavior will spread like an epidemic in the community. If you were a customer in the bank and saw the bank robber get a bunch of money and never get caught, you might try to get away with something bad too. And then a third person might see you do that act of unpunished bad behavior and do something else, and so on. Soon, the social order will have broken down completely. So structural functionalists note the importance of punishing the deviant individual to "head off" future deviant acts—not only by that person but by others in the society who might use that person as a role model.

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.1

### MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTIONS

#### What is structural functionalism?

In this exercise, you will review manifest and latent functions and the major social institutions.

Each of the seven institutions has both manifest and latent functions, a key element of structural functionalism. Write your answers to the following questions. Your instructor may ask you to share your answers, especially your answer to question 3.

1. What are the seven key institutions recognized by sociologists?
2. Define manifest and latent functions in your own words.
3. What is the manifest function of education? What is one latent function of education?
4. Why do we need to recognize latent, as well as manifest, functions of institutions?

### Social Change

Given this background, you can begin to predict how structural functionalist theorists view social change. What is social change? Sociologists see change happening when there are large-scale, macro, structural shifts in society or institutions within one or more societies. Functionalists, because they see harmony deriving from the stable functioning of institutions and cooperation among them, are not sure that social change is necessarily a good thing. Change in one institution rips apart the social harmony and equilibrium between it and the other institutions and requires a long time for the other social institutions to "catch up" and to reestablish social equilibrium. So, theorists using a structural functionalist perspective would argue that if change is needed at all, it should be done very slowly so as not to upset the equilibrium that undergirds the society and makes it strong.



We avoid accidents in traffic circles by following the norms for their use.

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During World War II, women worked in formerly male-dominated jobs like these in the Douglas Aircraft factory in California.

Granger, NYC—all rights reserved

### What Doesn't Structural Functionalism See?

Can rapid social change and the disharmony that comes along with it ever be a good thing for society to experience? Structural functionalist theorists would argue that no, it wouldn't—indeed couldn't—be a good thing. But think about that more deeply and use your sociological imagination.

Imagine we could go back in time to the mid-1940s, just after World War II ended. Pick nearly any town in the United States; what was it like? Let's just focus on one social institution—the economy. Most likely, many men were just returning from fighting overseas, and many women were still in the paid workforce. During the war, more women entered the paid labor force as men went off to fight. As the war ended, many men came back home and wanted, even needed, their jobs back. Some women wanted to go back to working primarily in the home, but others didn't. Of course, some—those widowed by the war, for instance—had to keep working to pay the family's bills. Many women were upset

when they were urged to leave the labor force and return home to have babies and keep house. They resented the fact that their job opportunities were once again limited to just a few fields, such as nursing and education.

How would functionalists evaluate this situation? Although they might not support the sex discrimination clearly evident in the labor force, they would want slow, incremental change to occur, because they could see how immediate gender equality in the workplace would create upheaval in the labor force. So, they might have argued for the benefits of many women's returning to unpaid labor while also advocating for public discussions and education about the possible merits of changing laws and regulations that discriminated against women in the workforce.

But another way of thinking about slow, gradual social change is that it would allow continued discrimination. Structural functionalism, by focusing on the need for social order and harmony, can overlook times in the life of the society when rapid social change—even if it may lead to some social chaos—is the just thing to do.

### Using Structural Functionalism to Analyze the Case of the Meitiv Family

We will now make use of the structural functionalist perspective to examine an incident that hit the news in 2015: the case of Danielle and Alexander Meitiv; their two children, Rafi, age 10, and Dvora, age 6; the Montgomery County, Maryland, police; and Child Protective Services (CPS) of Maryland (for more about this case, including video, check out the sources at the end of the chapter). On December 20, 2014, the Meitiv children were at a local park at 5 p.m. and started to walk the one mile back to their house, alone. Three blocks from their destination, police stopped the children, put them in their squad car, and brought them to police headquarters. Later that night, they were placed in the custody of CPS. The Meitivs did get their children back later that evening but were told that they were under investigation by CPS. Asked why they let their children walk the one mile from the park to their home, they stated that “children learn self-reliance by being allowed to make choices, build independence and progressively experience the world on their own” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 16). Almost two months later, CPS completed its investigation, with a finding of “unsubstantiated child abuse” (St. George 2015c, paragraph 1). But the case was far from over.

Just a few months later, the parents dropped both children off at another park at 4 p.m. and told them to be home by 6 p.m. At 4:58 p.m., a man walking his dog called local police about two

unsupervised children in the park. The man did not approach or talk with the children before placing the call. Police detained both children again, taking them immediately to CPS, where they were held without being allowed to contact their parents for more than five hours. CPS launched another investigation of their parents, questioning their ability to protect and parent their children correctly.

Why might the Meitiv parents allow their children to walk home alone? Are they just bad parents, too lazy to take proper care of them? No. The Meitivs practice what is called “free-range parenting,” a parenting philosophy that encourages parents to allow children to grow up independently, with a minimum of adult supervision, appropriate to the age of the children. Free-range parents feel that today, U.S. society prevents children from learning to be truly self-sufficient.

Let’s analyze the situation at this point. From a structural functionalist perspective, the manifest functions of the family as a social institution are to reproduce and then socialize the children to accept and follow the prevailing values in society. Obviously, the Meitivs have children, so their family has met that first manifest function. Where this example gets murky is when we shift our attention to the second manifest function.

The United States as a society values individualism and independence, and therefore parents are expected to teach their children to be self-reliant and independent. The devil’s in the details, though. *How* should they teach them independence and at *what* age? Are children aged 6 and 10 too young to be walking alone on a moderately busy street? Is it abuse or neglect if a parent teaches this particular instance of self-reliance “too soon” (i.e., at a time when many in society feel it is inappropriate)? And should parents who do so be judged “bad parents” by authorities—in this case, law enforcement and CPS?

This second investigation by CPS ended with “neglect ‘ruled out’” (St. George 2015a, paragraphs 1, 7), and the case was closed. A spokesperson for Maryland’s Department of Human Resources (to which CPS reports) added that “a child playing outside or walking unsupervised does not meet the criteria for a CPS response absent specific information supporting the conclusion that the child has been harmed or is at substantial risk of harm if they continue to be unsupervised” (St. George 2015a, paragraph 10).

Notice how this case shows the interrelatedness of social institutions (e.g., family and government), which is at the core of structural functionalism. Those using a structural functionalist perspective likely would leave unquestioned the assumption that family, law enforcement, and CPS all had a duty to be concerned about children in general and the Meitivs’ two children in particular. Each agency’s duty and, therefore, their employees’ behavior were grounded in its manifest function.

Structural functionalists would likely argue that today, in a populous community like Montgomery County, Maryland, most parents would not allow a 6-year-old to play unsupervised and walk back home at night, even in the company of a 10-year-old sibling. If this *is* the value consensus, then law enforcement and CPS’s decisions to take the children into custody and investigate their home life could be easily justified as correct. CPS’s initial review was meant to teach the Meitivs how to better parent their children and, simultaneously, to reinforce proper parenting behaviors to all who live in the country.

Could other sociologists look at the story of what happened to the Meitiv family and reach different sociological conclusions? Let’s turn next to the other macro-sociological theoretical perspective—conflict—and look at how sociologists using that perspective see social reality. Then we’ll return to the Meitiv family as our example.

### Check Your Understanding

1. What do structural functionalists see as the role of institutions in society?
2. Why do structural functionalists want social change to happen slowly?
3. What social institutions were involved in the Meitiv incidents?
4. Can you retell the story of the Meitiv family using the structural functionalist concepts of social institutions and manifest function?



Alexander Meitiv, right, prepares dinner with the help of his daughter, Dvora, and son, Rafi. The Meitivs' "free-range parenting" led to their facing charges of child neglect.

Bonnie Jo Mount/The Washington Post/Getty Images

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

### LEARNING QUESTION

#### 2.2 What is a conflict perspective?

Sociologists using the second macro-theoretical perspective, the **conflict perspective**, view society very differently from those looking at it from a functionalist perspective. Instead of seeing society as groups of institutions working together for the good of the whole, conflict theorists believe that society is composed of groups competing for power.

### Karl Marx and Advanced Capitalism

Karl Marx, the founder of the conflict perspective, believed that there were 10 stages of societal development, but he was most concerned with the last 3 stages. Given that, we'll start with stage 8, advanced capitalism. Marx held that advanced capitalism is an economic system based on the pursuit of maximum profit. Capitalism divides people into two major categories and a third, smaller group. There are the bourgeoisie, the rich owners of the **means of production** (the technology and materials needed to produce products, such as factories), and the proletariat, the poor workers (in the factories, etc.). The perpetually unemployed constitute the third group, the lumpenproletariat.

The advanced capitalism of Marx's time was a far cry from what we know capitalism to be today in the United States. Because there were no labor laws and it was so much cheaper to hire children than adults, the labor force included many children. There were no inspectors making sure that the workplace was safe, so many among the proletariat were injured. There was no worker's compensation insurance either, so injured members of the proletariat faced a difficult choice: show up and work despite the injury (but face the wrath of the owner for working slower) or quit work to heal—and starve. Wages were incredibly low because the bourgeoisie could use the ever growing pool of the lumpenproletariat as a stick over any worker who dared ask for a raise. Such a worker would be fired, as it was very easy to find a member of the lumpenproletariat who would work for the original wage (or an even lower one).



## False Consciousness

For Marx and like-minded individuals of the time period, the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie was a bit puzzling at first. Why didn't the proletariat realize how economically exploited they were under advanced capitalism and, for instance, stop showing up for work? Surely that would bring down the capitalist system.

Marx theorized that the workers were in a state of **false consciousness**. They collectively and individually did not understand that they and the owners had different self-interests. They were, he argued, misled to believe that what was good for the owner also benefited them. They believed that, if they just worked hard every day, they too might become members of the bourgeoisie. The media of the day, the religious institution, and the political institution all promulgated this: a good worker, in time, could “strike it rich” and get in on the many advantages of capitalism. But that was not going to happen for most of the proletariat; they lived on subsistence wages while the factory owner lived in a huge home, profiting from the proletariat's hard work. Yet their false consciousness kept them from seeing the reality of their lives—as members of the proletariat, they were compelled to work in a factory, sewing button after button for 16 hours a day, for the rest of their lives. Was this really what life should be, Marx asked?

## Alienation

No, it was not. The human race had what Marx called species being—the unique potential to imagine and then create what we imagine. Humans can sketch fantastically intricate designs and then make them become real in the world. No other animal can do that. But the proletariat were prevented from living up to their species being by the very nature of the capitalist exploitation they endured. They lived in a state of **alienation** that left them laboring for others and separated from what they created. Their monotonous jobs were small and repetitious; they often never even knew what the finished product of their labor looked like. Worse yet, they couldn't afford the products they were making.

## Karl Marx and Socialism

Marx felt that the proletariat could move from false consciousness to **true consciousness** if they came to grips with the depths of their exploitation by the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system they controlled. He believed that his writing, along with that of others, would “wake them up” from their state of alienated false consciousness and lead them to bring about change in their society.

Marx predicted that when the proletarian revolution began, society would move from the eighth stage of societal development, advanced capitalism, into the ninth stage, socialism. This ninth stage was a sort of “working it out” stage of social change. Economically, things would be more just than under capitalism but not yet truly equal. In socialism, children would be off the factory floors and sent to free public schools while able-bodied adults would work. The state would take over the means of production from the bourgeoisie through imposing a heavy progressive income tax on all adult citizens. This tax would economically hurt only the bourgeoisie (although many in that group were expected to die in the revolution). A proletariat worker, with almost no income, would not have to pay much. Also, new inheritance laws would ensure that rich families would no longer be able to pass money, property, and other expensive goods down to the next generation of their families. After a bourgeoisie died, the socialist government would “inherit” the rest of their money and goods and redistribute it to the citizens.

Socialism, Marx predicted, would last a few generations. He felt that the values of capitalism, such as support for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of just a few, the acquisition of goods as a sign of high status, and so forth, would take a while to die out. It might take a generation or two with people who had grown up only under socialism as an economic system before society would be ready for the tenth stage of social development: communism.

## Karl Marx and Communism

Marx believed that after a few generations of socialism as an economic system, some of the key social institutions, such as the political and economic systems, would no longer be needed and would

disappear. Under **communism**, all citizens would be equal and, at long last, able to fulfill their species being. Each person could contemplate and then go create. There would be no social classes under communism because every person would make the same wage for work done. Marx's vision of communism never became a reality, not even in nations that refer to themselves as communist.

All of these stages of social change are economic ones, and Marx is often called an economic determinist. The social institution that was the base of the society, for him, was always the economy. He believed that as the economy changed from advanced capitalism to socialism and ultimately to communism, the other six social institutions would necessarily change and adapt.

### From Marx to the Conflict Perspective

Marx's theory became the intellectual foundation for our second macro-theoretical perspective: the conflict perspective. Expanding upon Marx's analysis, conflict theorists recognize many ways in which social rewards are unequally distributed (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, citizenship status, age, ability or disability). They talk about the haves—those individuals and social institutions that gain access to more of society's scarce rewards—and the have-nots—those unable to get even their fair share of social rewards because of their category membership.

### Seeing the Social World Using the Conflict Perspective

Again, conflict is a macro-theoretical perspective; it analyzes society as a whole. But whereas structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see oppression: the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status.

Conflict theorists notice patterns of inequitable distribution of resources and rewards. They would note which groups in society have the most power and representation in the major institutions in society (e.g., who are our government and religious leaders, media owners, school board members, and sports team owners?). Sociologists using this perspective would also note how the structure of society perpetuates inequality by placing hurdles in front of some groups but not others. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the cost of tuition has led many students into debt. Why? Whom does this benefit and whom does it hurt?

Many conflict theorists aren't satisfied with merely recognizing such inequalities; they go that next step and suggest ways that they and others can reduce, if not completely eliminate, the oppression that they observe. Like Marx, sociologists who take a conflict perspective advocate social change to help the have-nots in society to gain more of society's rewards. And unlike most structural functionalists, who want social change to be slow and gradual so as not to upset the social harmony between social institutions, conflict theorists believe that social change to alleviate social injustice should be done rapidly. For conflict thinkers, slow, gradual social change is merely another term for continued oppression. They want to help the have-nots—now.

### What Doesn't the Conflict Perspective See?

The conflict perspective is so laser focused on oppression and making life better for the have-nots that it can overlook moments when society is going along fairly well. By concerning itself primarily with injustices and oppression, conflict can overlook times of societal harmony and equilibrium. Moreover, conflict theorists do not always acknowledge how disruptive and harmful change can be—for the have-nots as well as the haves.

### Theories under the Umbrella of the Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective, although unified in the focus on oppression and efforts to combat it, contains many types of conflict theories within it. For example, feminist conflict theorists argue that men as a category of people have greater access to social rewards than women (see Chapter 8). Critical race theorists focus on the social construction of race and the White-dominated racial hierarchy (see Chapter 9).

All conflict theorists, however, build on Marx's insight that some individuals and groups have more resources and rewards than others do and that this is unjust.

Disability scholars frequently use the conflict perspective to analyze how modern Western societies create the built environment (the architecture of public and private spaces) in ways that work for the able-bodied but not for people living with disabilities. Why, for example, cannot every entrance to a building include a ramp? A few decades ago, few buildings had ramps for people using wheelchairs. Today, often only one entrance is "made accessible." Notice that the language used implies that creating accessibility is an "extra," something that must be added to a structure rather than an organic part of every building. With that kind of a mind-set, it becomes easy to see that "normal bodies" are the standard against which all others are judged. Those of us with disabilities, then, are somehow lesser, deviant people and less deserving of access. As you can see, the fundamental assumption of the modern conflict theoretical perspective is still rooted in Marx's insight: the social rewards of society are not equally shared.

### Using the Conflict Perspective to Understand the Meitiv Family

Now turn your attention back to the Meitiv family, who advocated free-range parenting, an approach to parenting that encourages teaching children to be independent and autonomous from an early age. How might the conflict perspective analyze what happened to them? Recall the conflict perspective's basic assumption: different categories of people get different social rewards on the basis of their location in the social structure. In the family's interactions with law enforcement and CPS, you can see a power imbalance right away.

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.2

### CONFLICT THEORY AND STUDENT ATHLETES

#### What is a conflict perspective?

In this activity, you will apply conflict theory to analyze pay for student athletes.

NCAA regulations have traditionally limited the ways student athletes can profit from their participation in sports at their colleges and universities—even if they belong to one of the programs that collects millions of dollars in television fees and other revenues. In 2021, the NCAA changed some of these regulations and now allows athletes to benefit from the use of their "name, image, or likeness." However, this applies to very few college athletes, and no player may receive any other compensation (aside from scholarships that cover room and board) for their athletic efforts in college (NCAA 2021).

Think about the different groups associated with college basketball and football at your school. In addition to the student athletes, there are the coaches, student fans, and others who are spectators at the games. Also consider that the great majority of football and basketball programs cost more money to run than they bring in, and these costs are partially paid with student fees (Enright, Lehren, and Longoria 2020). Using conflict theory, consider the costs, resources, and rewards that come with college basketball and football.

Write your answers to the following questions:

1. Conflict theorists see society as consisting of groups competing for power (including money). How do the groups related to college basketball and football programs compete for funding?
2. In general, are the costs, resources, and rewards of college football and basketball programs distributed fairly?
3. Should some or all student basketball and football athletes receive salaries for playing? Why?
4. Do you think it is fair for some student athletes to benefit financially from the use of their "name, image, or likeness"?

Be prepared to discuss these questions in small groups and/or report back to the class.

An anonymous person placed a call to the police—without even talking to the children in question. Recall that the police and CPS detained the children before any investigation occurred. True, law enforcement and CPS workers were simply performing their jobs, but they represented the state and all its power. The Meitiv parents, in contrast, had little or no power. Indeed, Alexander Meitiv had to listen to the police lecture him on the dangers of the modern world when the police returned the children after the first incident (St. George 2015a). Educated people (Alexander is a theoretical physicist, Danielle a climate science consultant) discovered that they had not—at least in that moment—either the power or the freedom to decide how to raise their own offspring. And who had even less power in this situation? The children. Their feelings were ignored throughout the bureaucratic wrangling.

Now imagine the story playing out a bit differently. The family in question did not have an intact set of two parents but instead was led by a single parent. A poor, single parent. A poor, single parent of color working several jobs to make ends meet. Do you think that—at each step of the Meitivs' story—this poor single parent of color would have been treated the same way as the Meitivs were? Would he or she have gotten the kids back the night of the first “walking alone” incident? Still gotten the kids back after the second incident of their walking alone? Had neglect “ruled out” after the second incident? Had enough money to possibly sue CPS and law enforcement? In fact, would anyone even have called law enforcement if they had seen two children of color walking alone? Or if there had been a call, might it have been less about concern for the children's *safety* and more about “what are those kids up to” (i.e., someone worried about what possible criminal behavior they might be about to do)?

Consider the 2014 South Carolina case involving Debra Harrell, a 46-year-old African American woman, and her 9-year-old daughter Regina. Debra worked at a McDonald's and, lacking other childcare options, often had to bring her child with her. The girl would usually sit in the restaurant until her mother was done working, but on three days that summer, Debra allowed her child to play in a popular park about a mile away. On the third day, a parent of another child at the park asked Regina where her parents were. Alarmed when Regina told her that her mom was working, the parent called the police. The police then arrested Debra on the charge of felony child neglect and placed Regina in foster care. Debra was released on \$5,000 bail, but Regina remained in foster care for 17 days before being returned to her mother. Debra's arrest also meant that she lost her job (until media coverage pressured the local McDonald's to take her back) (CBS News 2014; Friedersdorf 2014; Reese 2014).

As tense as the Meitiv situation was, their race, education levels, and social class likely buffered them from the full power of CPS and the police. Low-income families, like Debra Harrell and her daughter, cannot afford to hire a private attorney. Often these families do not have an opportunity to quickly “fix” the situation. Also, how much power CPS should have remains a hotly debated issue. In the summer of 2021, Texas joined Utah and Oklahoma in passing a law to ensure a child's right to “reasonable independence” outside the authority of CPS (Martinko 2021).

### Check Your Understanding

1. According to Marx, why are the proletariat in a state of false consciousness in advanced capitalism?
2. How does a society move from advanced capitalism to socialism, according to Marx?
3. Can you explain the difference between socialism and communism?
4. What are the conceptual differences between the terms *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat* and *haves* and *have-nots*? Can you correctly use these terms?
5. What are two examples of conflict theories that fall under the umbrella of the conflict perspective?

## UNDERSTANDING THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

### LEARNING QUESTION

#### 2.3 What is symbolic interaction?

Macro-theoretical perspectives let sociologists see the big picture (the macro unit of analysis) of what is happening in the entire society, be it order and harmony (structural functionalism) or oppression (conflict). These theoretical lenses, however, miss something vital to the study of people in groups: interaction between individuals—the micro level. **Symbolic interaction** provides that theoretical balance for sociology. As the micro-theoretical perspective, it asks questions macro perspectives do not. For example, we can use it to examine how any one person develops a **self**—a sense of our place in society and who we are in relation to others. It helps us study how meaning comes to be constructed and shared by a group of people. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.



Nine-year-old Regina Harrell's mother was arrested and lost custody of Regina for almost three weeks because she allowed Regina to play in a park a block away from where she was working at a McDonald's.

AP Photo/Jeffrey Collins

### The Social Construction of Reality

Interactionist theorists study how **culture**—the way of life of a particular group of people—comes to be created. Individuals come together around one or more shared purposes and begin to interact. This interaction, over time, becomes routinized in various ways. So, for example, when the individuals first interact, they may create a common greeting. That greeting gets repeated every time they meet, and suddenly they have created a norm—an expectation about behavior. Now individuals *must* use this now standardized greeting or else be judged by the group as deviant. These creators of the greeting continue to use it, further normalizing it for their group. They will then teach new members (either born into the group or converts to it) the greeting and pass it along to the next generation.

In effect, the group constructs its culture (see Chapter 4). Culture includes norms and the symbols through which we communicate (e.g., language, numbers, gestures, and the meaning we attach to objects such as a nation's flag, a swastika, and a cross). Culture also consists of values, what we believe to be good or bad, and material objects the group creates to make life easier and meaningful. All of these are social constructions. This raises a significant sociological question: how does this socially constructed content (i.e., culture) get “inside” each person? Interactionists argue that it happens through the process of socialization, the sharing of culture from generation to generation.

Although we experience socialization throughout our lives, the most intense time for socialization is in childhood (what we often call **primary socialization**), so that will be our focus. George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, the founders of the symbolic interactionist perspective, both emphasized the importance of the socialization process. You will learn more about their work in Chapter 5. In this chapter, we will focus on Cooley's contributions. Through his “looking glass self” theory, he described how a child develops a sense of self in three steps.

## The Looking Glass Self Theory

A child's first step in developing a sense of self is to imagine how they appear to relevant others—their parents, siblings, grandparents, and so on. Cooley argued that it isn't possible to receive direct information about how others think or feel; instead, the child tries to put themselves in the shoes of the other person and then contemplates what that other person is feeling about them. So, they might imagine, "I think my parents love me."

In the second step, the child reacts to the feedback the parents and others give about their perceptions toward the child. That feedback could be verbal (e.g., "I love you") or nonverbal (e.g., holding hands, hugging, smiling). What is important in this step, Cooley argued, is that the child is responding to what they feel the feedback means about them. The child perceives who they are (to others—and thus to themselves) via feedback from others. These others are the social mirror that the child uses to develop a sense of self.

Finally, in the third step, the child integrates the first two into a coherent and unique sense of self. Interaction with **primary groups** (small collections of people of which a person is a member, usually for life, and in which deep emotional ties develop, such as one's family of origin) shapes the child's sense of self. Others in effect become the "mirror" by which each person sees oneself.

Although socialization in childhood is foundational, Cooley would argue that socialization continues throughout a person's life. A new employee receives feedback from the boss and peers and integrates that feedback into a sense of self as a worker, for example.

## Dramaturgy Theory

Interaction does not just focus on the construction of the self. Erving Goffman (1959) was a sociologist who said that life was like a play—a drama—in which we are all actors. He created dramaturgy theory to explain interaction among small groups by looking at the social actors (the individuals involved in the interaction), the social scripts the actors follow, and the props (material objects) the actors use to enhance their performances. Goffman also looked at the settings where interactions take place. Two of the key ones are the **front stage** (where the interaction takes place) and the **back stage** (where one prepares for the interaction).

According to Goffman, we each try to control the vibe we give off to others. Each of us uses **presentation of self** skills—shaping the physical, verbal, visual, and gestural messages that we give to others—to (try to) control their evaluations of us. This is what Goffman called impression management. Let's say some new friends you'd like to impress invite you to go to a football game, assuming you, like them, love the sport and this particular team. You have never gone to a football game or paid much attention to the sport, but you'd like to fit in with your friends. Your roommate helps you (back stage) dress appropriately by lending you her sweatshirt with the team's mascot emblazoned on it and gives you a quick lesson on how football is played and the key players on the team. She also tells you that your friends may well expect you to eat and drink with them outside the stadium before the game.

### DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.3

#### LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

#### What is symbolic interaction?

In this exercise, you will consider the ways groups of people construct language.

Language, both written and symbolic (think, for example, of our use of numerals in mathematics as a type of scientific language), is a social construction. It is different from place to place and group to group. Write your answers to the following questions.

1. Consider "Face Mask Required" signs. Are they likely to elicit the same reactions from all Americans? Why?
2. What are some other examples of different groups reacting to the same words or symbols in different ways? Think of different age groups or members of different social classes.
3. How do these examples demonstrate that language is a social construction?

You join your new friends outside the stadium (front stage). The pregame eating and drinking goes without a hitch, and your new friends tell you how happy they are to have found you, a fellow fan of their beloved team. All goes well until you get into the stadium and the game begins. Suddenly, everyone is shouting chants at the top of their lungs—except you. Your roommate forgot to fill you in on this part of the script!

Goffman's work helps us see that the world is a stage and we are all actors as we interact with one another. Like other theories under the symbolic interactionist perspective, dramaturgy allows us to understand why individuals behave differently in various social settings. In turn, this knowledge can help us navigate our social world successfully.

### Social Constructionism

This theory begins with the social construction of reality: every society creates norms, values, objects, and symbols it finds meaningful and useful. Social constructionists also note that different categories or groups of people in the society get different rewards. Some have more, some have less. Social constructionists argue that this stratification—although felt in the world by individuals—is ultimately created and sustained through social systems, which must be made more just.

So, constructionists would argue that it is more important to study the *idea* of poverty than individual poor people (Best 2012). They focus on the constructed nature of every stratification system (e.g., wealth/poverty, race, sex/gender, age, the digital divide). In turn, they see the possibilities for change embedded in social interactions that can persuade particular audiences (e.g., Congress, the mayor, the local press). For example, if poverty is constructed as “something that will always be with us”—and everyone believes that to be true—then policy makers do not need to focus their time, energy, or efforts on reducing poverty. However, if poverty is constructed as something that we can—and should—eliminate, then policy makers will feel more pressure to create policies that work to minimize, if not eradicate, poverty. So too, how the press covers policy makers will shift depending upon how poverty (or any other social problem) is socially constructed.

The social constructionist theory can be used to understand how our interactions can lead to a variety of societal issues and help address them. In the following Sociologists in Action, Chelsea Marty, an undergraduate at Valdosta State University, relates how she used **social constructionism** to understand how the internalization of racism and racial stereotypes can lead to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism. Chelsea also describes the steps she is taking to confront and tackle these social problems.

## SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

### COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE

#### Chelsea Marty

At Valdosta State University in Georgia, I was involved with a speaker series titled Courageous Conversations about Race (CCR). This series grew out of an effort to address racial tension present on our college campus. We wanted students, faculty, and other members of the community to feel open and safe enough to discuss racial topics and concepts that often go unmentioned. In the process, we hoped to create a campus environment more inclusive and appreciative of diversity.

While working with CCR, I eventually became a member of the organizing and planning team. I, along with my research partner and friend Ashlie Prain, created a student-led CCR series. This series featured students who gave presentations, panels, and performances that focused on racial issues. Topics included White supremacy, colorism, intersectionality, police brutality, and race and politics.

During one CCR, I presented on the research project “The Path of Our Narratives,” which I conducted with Ashlie. Using narratives of racism encountered in childhoods, we discussed the early internalization of racism and racial stereotypes. We then connected the early socialization of such biases to systematic oppression and institutionalized racism.

My presentation and approach to working on this series are closely related to the sociological theory of social constructionism. Social constructionists focus on the social construction of reality and how interpretations and experiences shape our social structure. This is evident in my presentation, as I point out how childhood experiences of racism can be linked to the institutionalization of racism itself.

For example, in one narrative, a young White girl shares her experience of being moved from a predominantly Black school to a predominantly White school. As a child, she was told that this move was for her own good and that she would make better friends and have better opportunities. Although this individual story may seem insignificant, it actually is indicative of the racial biases used to structure our school system. Such biases contribute to the segregation, underfunding, and lack of resources that severely damage the quality of education that marginalized groups in our society receive.

Additionally, the series as a whole reflected how social interpretations of race have influenced our actions, relationships, politics, and much more. Through an understanding of the theory of social constructionism, we can collectively work to recognize and dismantle racial biases and stereotypes.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of CCR is that, in addition to sparking conversation and promoting education, it inspires action and encourages community involvement. Several individuals from the community have taken on the responsibility of planning more talks and campaigns that address racial issues within our community, and I look forward to being a part of those efforts.

**Discussion Question:** How can understanding the theory of social constructionism help you recognize and dismantle racial biases and stereotypes?

*Chelsea Marty was an undergraduate at Valdosta State who went on to get a master's degree in sociology and currently works as a program support specialist for a federal grant program called Upward Bound.*

### What Doesn't Symbolic Interaction See?

Recall that both macro-theoretical perspectives we have discussed allow us to examine the causes of social problems, how to solve them, and the rate of social change. Social problems and social change are macro-sociological concepts, but symbolic interaction is a micro-level theoretical perspective. We could use symbolic interaction to study the experience of a female cadet in a predominantly male military academy but not to understand the institutional issues of gender inequality in the government, economy, and military that led to the academy's being predominantly male. By concentrating on how individuals become socialized into the norms and values of their social group and thereby shape their sense of self, interaction focuses on different questions than the two macro-theoretical perspectives.

### Using Symbolic Interaction to Understand the Meitiv Family

We now return to the Meitiv family one last time, to examine their situation through the lens of symbolic interaction. Danielle and Alexander Meitiv socialized their children by modeling appropriate behavior and incrementally giving them more responsibility. They then provided feedback to the children on their behavior. Part of that socialization process involved having the children walk together short distances. The parents followed behind the children, without their knowledge, to observe their behavior during these solo outings. What they saw led them to trust that their children could cope with any possibilities that might occur when they walked the mile home from school together. These successful outings boosted the children's self-concepts. Danielle described the reasoning behind their socialization methods, saying that "I think it's absolutely critical for their development—to learn responsibility, to experience the world, to gain confidence and competency" (St. George 2015b, paragraph 6).

"We wouldn't have let them do it if we didn't think they were ready for it," Danielle said. She said her son and daughter have previously paired up for walks around the block, to a nearby 7-Eleven and to a library about three quarters of a mile away. "They have proven they are responsible," she said. "They've developed these skills." (St. George 2015b, paragraph 4)



But while the Meitiv parents felt that they were properly socializing their children, others did not see the children's behavior in the same way. They wondered if the children had enough life experience to cope with whatever might happen. When they went on longer walks, the children often carried a card the family had created, which read, "I am not lost. I am a free-range kid" (St. George 2015b, paragraph 11). Without that prop—a symbolic piece of information—the police officers who responded had little information to go on about who the children were and why they were out alone and therefore took them into protective custody.

As the family became caught up in the CPS legal system, Danielle claimed that these authority figures were attempting to socialize her children to be fearful, in contrast to the parents' view that the world, overall, was a safe place for children:

My son told us that the social worker who questioned him asked, "What would you do if someone grabbed you?" and suggested that he tell us that he doesn't want to go off on his own anymore because it's dangerous and that there are "bad guys waiting to grab you." This is how adults teach children to be afraid even when they are not in danger. (Meitiv 2015, paragraph 7)

The Meitiv story spread as national media picked up the story, and more and more individuals began to weigh in publicly, writing comments on online news articles and other social media. Many parents supported the Meitivs, but others criticized their free-range parenting style. Their story showed that there are competing cultural understandings of what it means to be a child and to be a parent in U.S. culture.

A social movement in support of free-range parenting sprang up, leading to a petition to change Maryland's laws. Today, Maryland's laws remain the same, but the movement exists across the nation, and Utah became the first state to pass a "free-range parenting" law, in 2018. Utah's law protects parents from charges of abuse for "permitting a child, whose basic needs are met and who is of sufficient age and maturity to avoid harm or unreasonable risk of harm, to engage in independent activities." These activities include "traveling to and from school, including by walking, running, or bicycling; traveling to and from nearby commercial or recreational facilities; and remaining at home unattended" (Utah State Legislature 2018, lines 316–22).

## FULL THEORETICAL CIRCLE

### LEARNING QUESTION

- 2.4** How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Each family creates, within reason, its own norms for how to raise children and implements those norms. But what do we mean by "within reason"? Society determines what is "reasonable"; it is socially constructed. Over time, certain behavioral patterns will become more commonplace in society and become the institutionalized version (in this case, of the family institution).

And now we have come full circle: a small group creates its own norms. Over time, some of those norms get shared among more members of the society as people interact, which is what symbolic interactionists study. These norms end up constructing sets of statuses and roles around key aspects of how society operates and creates social institutions. Once social institutions become routinized, they shape society and how individuals react to those social institutions, which structural functionalists analyze. And, inevitably, power differentials arise between the haves and the have-nots in social institutions and in the broader society, which sociologists using the conflict perspective study.

## DOING SOCIOLOGY 2.4

### COMPARING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

#### How do the structural functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interaction perspectives work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

In this exercise, you will point out how each perspective helps you describe your hometown. Write your responses to each of the following prompts.

1. Briefly describe your hometown using each theoretical perspective. Structural functionalism will help you see how different groups work together in social harmony. Conflict theory will highlight social oppression. Looking through the lens of symbolic interactionism will let you notice how small groups in your hometown construct and implement their values and rules.
2. Why does using all three of these theoretical frameworks help you get a more complete view of your hometown?

The theoretical perspectives we have discussed give us ways to analyze human behavior. Each perspective (and the many theories it encompasses) offers a unique viewpoint. None of them is the correct one; rather, each of the perspectives gives sociologists a particular lens with which to see human society. Structural functionalists focus on social order and institutions and agreement on the basic values that create and sustain that social order but tend not to notice conflict and inequality. Conflict theorists do just the opposite; they see social problems caused by oppression and injustices but overlook moments of order and social harmony. Neither structural functionalists nor conflict theorists deal with the behavior of small groups, leaving that to symbolic interactionists, who examine how groups create culture and pass it on to the next generation but ignore macro issues of power and control, social harmony, and balance.

Most likely one or more of these perspectives make better sense to you, and that is fine. Practice using all three of them as you look around your social world, however. You will see how you can focus on different angles of society with each.

#### Check Your Understanding

1. Why is symbolic interaction a micro-level theoretical perspective?
2. What do sociologists mean by “the self”?
3. According to interactionists, how is society socially constructed?
4. How can different groups of individuals see the same social problem differently? Can you give an original example of this?

## CONCLUSION

Theoretical perspectives frame the social world for sociologists. They highlight some parts of human behavior and blur others. Many sociologists use the lenses of multiple theoretical perspectives to compensate for the theoretical oversights of each perspective. The theoretical language you have learned in this chapter will reemerge in many future chapters, because these are the main ways sociologists see human behavior. Chapter 3 will add to your sociological skill set by showing you the varied ways that sociologists collect data about the social world—to which we then apply theoretical perspectives and theories.

## REVIEW

### 2.1 Why and how do sociologists use theoretical perspectives?

The three theoretical perspectives—structural functionalism, conflict, and symbolic interaction—help sociologists to examine the complexities of social life. They provide structure to the vast data that sociologists gather and allow us to find patterns in human behavior.

### 2.2 What is structural functionalism?

Structural functionalism is a macro-level theoretical perspective that helps us analyze an entire society and how its parts work together. Structural functionalists tend to see social harmony and social equilibrium, on the basis of the perceived smooth interactions of the seven social institutions. Structural functionalism is a “big-picture” way of viewing societies. Imagine a sociologist standing at a distance and looking at how society and its parts are working together.

### 2.3 What is a conflict perspective?

Conflict perspectives are macro-level perspectives that analyze entire societies. Whereas structural functionalist theorists examine society and see social order and harmony, conflict theorists see something completely different. They see inequality—the haves holding the have-nots back to maintain their own elevated status. Conflict theories focus on the oppression and injustice at work in society caused by the haves’ excessive political, economic, and social power. Conflict thinkers advocate for rapid social change to give more social rewards to the have-nots.

### 2.4 What is symbolic interaction?

Symbolic interaction is a micro-level theoretical perspective that focuses on the individual or small groups rather than an entire society. Symbolic interactionists focus on how the self is constructed through socialization and how a group socially constructs norms and values that then govern the group’s behaviors. Symbolic interaction helps us understand how individuals can shape, as well as be shaped by, society. It also helps us study how meaning comes to be constructed and shared by a group of people. Symbolic interactionists view society as a social construction, continually constructed and reconstructed by individuals through their use of shared symbols.

### 2.5 How do structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction work together to help us get a more complete view of reality?

Each of the major theoretical perspectives provides a different view of society. Structural functionalists focus on how the social institutions of society can work together to create and sustain social order but tend to overlook inequality and conflict. Conflict theorists focus on inequality and conflict but tend to overlook social order and consensus in society. Neither of these macro perspectives focuses on individuals and small groups in society. Symbolic interactionists use a micro lens to focus on how individuals and small groups work together to create and re-create society. In the process, they show how individuals develop a sense of self through socialization. Together, structural functionalism, conflict perspectives, and symbolic interaction give us a more complete view and understanding of how society works.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe anyone can “make it” in society if they just work hard enough? Or do you think some have more advantages than others? How have your life experiences influenced the “glasses” you use to see the world?
2. If you were working for the Maryland Child Protective Services, tasked with helping children in need, how would you feel about the Meitivs’ parenting style? Think especially about your judgment of the parents’ choice to let their children walk home alone the *second* time.

3. If you were alive when Marx was and you were a wealthy owner of a factory who'd been planning to pass down your wealth to your children, what would you think of Marx's new economic system called socialism? Why? And how would you feel as a member of the proletariat?
4. What group(s) could be analyzed as the haves in the Meitivs' situation? Why? Who might be the have-nots? Why?
5. U.S. society often states that "children are precious" and "children are so important," yet children have very few rights. Why do you think that is? How might a conflict theorist view this issue?

### KEY TERMS

alienation (p. 25)	micro level of analysis (micro) (p. 18)
back stage (p. 30)	presentation of self (p. 30)
communism (p. 26)	primary groups (p. 30)
conflict theory/conflict perspective (p. 24)	primary socialization (p. 29)
culture (p. 29)	self (p. 29)
dysfunctions (p. 20)	social constructionism (p. 31)
false consciousness (p. 25)	social institutions (p. 18)
front stage (p. 30)	structural functionalism (p. 18)
latent functions (p. 20)	symbolic interaction (p. 29)
macro level of analysis (macro) (p. 19)	theoretical perspective (p. 18)
manifest functions (p. 19)	theory (p. 18)
means of production (p. 24)	true consciousness (p. 25)