**The Sociological Perspective: seeing the broader social context:**

This perspective stresses that the social contexts in which people live influences their lives, and it examines how it influences our lives. At the center of the sociological perspective is looking at how groups influence people, especially how people are influenced by their society, culture, and sub-cultures.

To find out why people do what they do and how people’s lives are lived out, sociologists look at “social location”—the corners in life the people occupy such as jobs, income, education, gender, race-ethnicity, age, and others. In other words, how do these social categories affect people’s ideas and behavior and affect society’s behavior toward people?

The social groups you belong to shape your desires and behaviors and others ideas about you and behavior towards you.

**THEORIES:**

**Functionalism (macro-level theory):**

Comes from the origins of sociology; Comte, Spencer, Durkheim.

**Underlying Assumptions of the Theory**: society is a whole unit, made up of interrelated parts; each part has functions to fulfill, when all parts are fulfilling their functions, society is in a state of equilibrium or in other words in a normal state. So, the social institution of education must fulfill the function of teaching knowledge. It must fulfill this function because most of the other institutions, labor force, political institution, criminal justice system, etc. depend on people who have been educated. The functions that each part of society fulfills can either be **manifest** or **latent.**

Manifest functions are the intended, purposeful, or obvious consequences, such as the institution of higher education teaching knowledge. Latent functions are the unintended consequences that typically help a system, such as the institution of higher education being a place to find a spouse. Latent dysfunctions are the unintended consequences that typically harm the system, such as violence in families.

Functionalists look at the relationship between the parts of society; how these parts are *functional*(have beneficial consequences) or *dysfunctional* (have negative consequences.)

Functionalists maintain that society is always trying to maintain its equilibrium; in other

words, all parts of society constantly try to fulfill their functions so society is in a normal

state.

Functionalists see rapid change as not good for society because it throws it out of

equilibrium.

**Conflict Theory (macro-level theory):**

Karl Marx developed conflict theory.

Marx saw the masses working for the few. Those who had the means of making the

money, *bourgeoisie*, and those who did all the work to make those few the money, the

exploited *proletariats.*

Marx concluded that the key to all human history is class struggle. He believed that in all societies, small groups controlled the means of production and exploit the masses who do not.

**Underlying Assumptions of the Theory:** Conflict theorists see unequal distribution of resources: money, power, education, and social prestige; those with more power, money, education, and authority try to enforce conformity from those who don’t have it. In order for there to be change from this, there must be a revolt, or what we now call “conflict.” Conflict generates change. Conflict theorists do not see society as maintaining equilibrium and harmony, rather they see it as composed of groups fiercely competing for the scarce resourcesof wealth, power, prestige, and privilege. When groups revolt and create a new division of the resources, in other words create change, which is good. So, conflict theorists view change in society as good and necessary. An example is the feminist movement, which was a revolt in many ways of those without the money and power (women) causing conflict with those who had it (men) until some change was made; women’s pay and job opportunities increased because of the conflict/revolt. **Revolts or conflicts aren’t always big movements. Sometimes inequality is made public by media or social media and become highly debated and discussed but not “real” conflict results; rather the need for change is made public.**

**Symbolic Interactionism (micro-level theory):**

Brought into sociology by sociologists Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead.

**Underlying Assumptions of the Theory:** Society is composed of culturally defined symbols. These symbols, which we attach meanings to, are the basis of social life. Our actions and interactions are guided by the meanings we have attached to the symbols, we learn the meanings from our interactions. In other words, we use symbols to create social life. Humans act toward things based on the meanings they have for those things. Meanings are socially derived through our interactions yet they are subject to our own individual interpretation.

**So, in other words…**

If we don’t have a symbol for it, it can’t exist. We make up symbols for everything such as calling mashed up tree pulp, ***paper*** and then we attach meaning to the symbol (label), such as paper with lines is meant to be written on but mashed up tree pulp (paper) that ends up green and with numbers on it is meant to be spent, so we act based on the meaning we have for the symbol. Symbols and the meanings attached to them vary by culture, age, language, gender, over time, and in many other ways.

Symbols are abstract, no inherent reason for something to have the symbol it has but even though they are abstract, the meanings attached to the abstract symbols can be very powerful.

Symbolic interactionism can view and describe change in our world by describing our

changing symbols and the meanings attached to those symbols.

Symbolic interactionists can analyze social change but they cannot pass judgment on the

value of such change, good or bad, because there is no value framework in this theory.

Our most used and common symbol: language in all its forms.