Comparing the Paradigms

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will compare the paradigms of functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism by seeing how theorists following each approach would lead to different studies of the same topic. You will also explore how the use of these paradigms builds your problem solving skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Comparing the Paradigms

One way to illustrate the differences between the three paradigms we've been discussing is to see how each paradigm would lead to different studies of the same topic.

HINT

We will return to these three big theories many times through this course. Don't worry if they feel confusing now; after seeing many more examples of how these paradigms play out in specific sociological contexts, you will develop a much richer understanding.

The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence, yet it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of United States society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Let's see how food consumption may be examined from each of the three main sociological paradigms.

A structural functional approach to the topic of food consumption might be interested in the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another examination might study the different functions that occur in food production, from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism. Functionalists would also examine how food production is related to social solidarity and equilibrium through the division of labor and interdependence among groups in modern society.

A conflict theorist might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food and would explore where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit, and how the government mediates those interests. Or a conflict theorist might undertake a macro analysis that examines the power that large farming conglomerates like Monsanto have over comparatively powerless local farmers. The documentary film *Food, Inc.* (2009) gives an example of this as it depicts Monsanto's patenting of seed technology. Other topics of study might include how nutrition varies between different social classes or racial and ethnic groups, or why there are food deserts (places that lack access to fresh produce) in densely

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

populated areas.

A sociologist viewing food consumption through a symbolic interactionist lens would be more interested in micro-level topics, such as the symbolic use of food in religious rituals, or the role it plays in the social interaction of a family dinner. This perspective might also study the interactions among group members who identify themselves based on their sharing a particular diet, such as vegetarians (people who don't eat meat) or locavores (people who strive to eat locally produced food). Interactionists might also examine the relationships between farmworkers and their employers, how workers or the owners of large farms see themselves, and/or specific symbols that have taken on importance (i.e. the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) use a bloody t-shirt to represent violence against farmworkers).

Problem Solving: Apply Your Skill

Imagine you work in public health. You have identified lack of exercise as a problem in your community and are studying effective methods to address this problem. Consider this issue from a structural functional approach, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionist lens. Brainstorm methods that you can implement by examining this issue from different perspectives.

The following table shows different sociological theoretical perspectives that enable sociologists to view social issues through a variety of useful lenses.

Sociological Theoretical Perspectives

Sociological Paradigm	Level of Analysis	Focus	Criticism
Structural Functionalism	Macro	The way each part of society functions together to contribute to the whole	Doesn't explain social change; repetitive behavior is assumed to be useful because it is repeated
Conflict Theory	Micro	The way inequalities contribute to social differences and perpetuate differences in power	Doesn't explain stability; sometimes focuses on class to the exclusion of other axes of conflict
Symbolic Interactionism	Micro	One-to-one interactions and communications	Narrow focus doesn't include structural constraints

As you continue through this course, you'll see many further examples of how these different approaches are used by sociologists to interpret many different aspects of society and culture.

BIG IDEA

A functionalist perspective lets sociologists evaluate the functionality and stability of society. A conflict perspective enables a researcher to find the inequalities in society in order to create social change. A symbolic interactionist looks at the individual to see how their interactions build and shape society.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you looked at the three dominant paradigms in sociological theory and their major

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.

critiques side by side. You spent some time **comparing the paradigms** by seeing how they would each lead to different studies on the same topic. Finally, you explored ways in which the three dominant paradigms strengthen your problem solving skills.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: THIS TUTORIAL HAS BEEN ADAPTED FROM "INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY" BY LUMEN LEARNING. ACCESS FOR FREE AT **LUMEN LEARNING**. LICENSE: **CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL.**

© 2023 SOPHIA Learning, LLC. SOPHIA is a registered trademark of SOPHIA Learning, LLC.