

Conflict Theory

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to one of the three main theoretical approaches in sociology: conflict theory, an approach that looks at society as a competition for limited resources. You will also be introduced to the prominent critiques and variants on this approach. Finally, you will explore how conflict theory builds your problem solving skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Conflict Theory
2. Criticism
3. Race and Conflict Theory
4. Feminist Theory

1. Conflict Theory

Conflict theory looks at society as a competition for limited resources. This perspective is a macro-level approach most identified with the writings of German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx (1818–1883), who saw society as being made up of two classes, the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, and the proletariat, or workers, who must compete for social, material, and political resources such as food and housing, employment, education, and leisure time. Social institutions like government, education, and religion reflect this competition in their inherent inequalities and help maintain the unequal social structure.

In the traditional Marxist view of society, capitalism is an economic structure that is dependent on maintaining a group of laborers to do the large amount of work at the lowest level of the class ladder: mass production and corporate agriculture. According to Marx, the **bourgeoisie** own and control the means of production, which leads them to exploit the workers because they are motivated by profit. In this arrangement, the **proletariat**, or workers, have only their labor to sell and do not own or control capital. This is complicated by the control that the bourgeoisie often exert over the media outlets that disseminate messages and images that serve to normalize class inequality. These are just some of the structural constraints that prevent workers from joining together in what Marx called **class consciousness**, or a common group identity as exploited proletarians and potential revolutionaries.

German sociologist Max Weber agreed with some of Marx's main ideas, but also believed that in addition to economic inequalities, there were inequalities of political power and social structure that caused conflict. Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender, and that people's reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power.



BIG IDEA

Conflict theory's big idea is that society is built around a competition for limited resources.



Problem Solving: Skill in Action

Considering Marx and Weber's societal views, we can see that conflict theory explains many problems in society, such as poverty and racial inequality. By examining issues in society through the lens of conflict theory, sociologists can begin to unravel the details and nuances of these issues. While it may not fully solve the complex problems that exist in our society, it enables us to continue making progress in addressing them.



TERMS TO KNOW

Conflict Theory

A paradigm that looks at society as a competition for limited resources.

Bourgeoisie

The capitalists who own and control the means of production, which leads them to exploit the workers because they are motivated by profit.

Proletariat

Workers who have only their labor to sell and do not own or control capital.

Class Consciousness

A sense of common group identity as exploited proletarians and potential revolutionaries.

2. Criticism

Just as structural functionalism was criticized for focusing too much on the stability of societies, conflict theory has been criticized because it tends to focus on conflict to the exclusion of recognizing stability. Many social structures are extremely stable or have gradually progressed over time rather than changing abruptly, as conflict theory would suggest.

Other criticisms and elaborations of conflict theory are from the angles of race and gender, as we will see momentarily.



BIG IDEA

A criticism of conflict theory is that it accounts for change throughout society, but it cannot reconcile periods of relative stability and growth.

3. Race and Conflict Theory

Marx and Weber are white Europeans who are most associated with the foundation of conflict theory, but their perspectives were limited by their background. Several Black American researchers contributed key aspects to conflict theory that helped the paradigm to better explain the experiences of non-Europeans.

Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) was a Black researcher who articulated the conflict perspective when she theorized a connection between an increase in lynching and an increase in Black socio-economic mobility, in the United States from the late 1800s into the early 20th century. She also examined competition within the feminist movement as women fought for the right to vote, yet the presumably egalitarian mainstream suffragist movements were headed by white women who excluded Black women from suffrage.

W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) was a Black sociologist who also examined race in the U.S. and in U.S. colonies from a conflict perspective. He emphasized the importance of a reserve labor force, made up of Black men. Race conflict paradigms will be examined later in the course in the module devoted to race and ethnicity.

IN CONTEXT

W.E.B. DuBois was a classical sociologist who, after earning a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895 (the first Black man to do so), went on to an extremely productive career with extensive publications, research, theorizing, and activism. The *Philadelphia Negro* (1896) is considered one of the first examples of scientifically framed and conducted sociology research. DuBois' study included over 2,500 in-person interviews conducted with African American households in the seventh ward of Philadelphia and included visual representations of data such as bar graphs to illustrate the realities of racism.

He entered the national stage with an article written for *The Atlantic* in 1897 in which he described double consciousness:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to

attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently—that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development.”

4. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory was developed to fill a void in Marxist theory, which examined class, but not gender as a distinct category. Feminist theory examines gender and gender inequality and also points out the male-centric aspects of conflict theory. It focuses on analyzing the limitations faced by women when they claim the right to equality with men. Some feminist scholars also examine the gendered nature of human interactions, on a micro-sociological basis as opposed to a macro-sociological one.

Feminist scholars study a range of topics, including sexual orientation, race, economic status, and nationality. However, at the core of feminist sociology is the idea that, in most societies, women have been systematically oppressed, and that men have been historically dominant. We call that **patriarchy**—any group of social relationships in which men dominate and exclude women.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In the United States, most captains of industry, CEOs, and politicians are men and have historically been men. Women as a group, on the other hand, have had to struggle to get to vote, struggle to get an education, struggle to get hired.

Feminist theory has been criticized in turn for its early focus on the lived experiences of white, educated women—which represent just a small subset within American society. **Intersectional theory** examines multiple, overlapping identities that include Black, Latina, Asian, gay, trans, working class, poor, single parent, working, stay-at-home, immigrant, and undocumented women, among others. This synthesis of analytical categories takes into consideration the various lived experiences of a more diverse range of women.



TERMS TO KNOW

Patriarchy

Any group of social relationships in which men dominate and exclude women.

Intersectional Theory

Theory that examines the impact of multiple, overlapping identities.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you were introduced to **conflict theory**, which holds that society is best understood as a competition for limited resources, especially between classes. **Race and conflict theory** brings the tensions of race and ethnicity into the ideas of traditional conflict theory, and **feminist theory** does the

same for gender. Lastly, you explored how understanding conflict theory strengthens your problem solving skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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REFERENCES Du Bois, W. E. B. (1897, August). *Strivings of the Negro People*. The Atlantic Monthly.



TERMS TO KNOW

Bourgeoisie

The capitalists who own and control the means of production, which leads them to exploit the workers because they are motivated by profit.

Class Consciousness

A sense of common group identity as exploited proletarians and potential revolutionaries.

Conflict Theory

A paradigm that looks at society as a competition for limited resources.

Intersectional Theory

Theory that examines the impact of multiple, overlapping identities.

Patriarchy

Any group of social relationships in which men dominate and exclude women.

Proletariat

Workers who have only their labor to sell and do not own or control capital.