Reading 4

Three Sociological Perspectives

Paul Colomy

When conducting research, sociologists typically draw on one or more perspectives. Sociological perspectives provide very general ways of conceptualizing the social world and its basic elements. A perspective consists of a set of fairly abstract assumptions about the nature of human action and the character of social organization. Each perspective can be likened to a spotlight that brightly illuminates select aspects of behavior and social relations while leaving other areas shrouded in darkness. Because a single perspective supplies only a partial or one-sided view, a comprehensive understanding of social life requires becoming familiar with several different perspectives.

Sociology contains a large number of distinct perspectives, and they can be divided into two broad categories: micro and macro. In very general terms, micro perspectives are oriented toward small time and small space, while macro perspectives are oriented toward big time and big space (Collins 1981). That is, micro perspectives are usually concerned with the conduct of individuals and small groups as it unfolds in relatively small spatial contexts and over short durations of time. Macro perspectives, on the other hand, focus on larger entities—not individuals and small groups, but institutions, entire societies, and even the global system—and on how these entities emerge, maintain themselves, and change over decades, centuries, and millennia. The following section outlines one micro perspective (symbolic interactionism) and two macro perspectives (functionalism and the conflict approach).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism's intellectual roots reside in pragmatism, a philosophical tradition developed by such prominent, early, twentieth-century American thinkers as John Dewey, William James, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Peirce. The sociological implications of pragmatism were articulated by several innovative sociologists, including Robert Park,

W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer, Everett Hughes, and Erving Goffman, who taught or studied at the University of Chicago between 1910 and 1960. Because it originated at the University of Chicago, symbolic interactionism is sometimes referred to as the Chicago School.

Symbolic interactionism is based on five core ideas. First, it assumes that human beings act in terms of the meanings they assign to objects in their environment. (Interactionists define the term object very broadly to include material things, events, symbols, actions, and other people and groups.) Using slightly different terminology to make the same point, interactionists maintain that people's conduct is powerfully influenced by their definition of the situation. This assumption can be clarified by contrasting it to a rudimentary model of social action advanced by a psychological perspective known as behaviorism. The behaviorist approach characterizes conduct as a response to objective stimuli, and suggests that human behavior resembles a series of stimulus-response claims:

stimulus ⸺⸺⸺> response.

Rejecting the notion that individuals respond directly to an objective stimulus, interactionists insist that people interpret, or assign meanings to, the stimulus before they act:

stimulus ⸺⸺⸺> interpretation ⸺⸺⸺> response.

Athletes' reactions to coaches criticisms, for instance, depends largely on whether they interpret that criticism as a constructive attempt to improve their play or as a malicious attack on their character.

Even when a definition of the situation is demonstrably false, it can still exert a powerful effect on behavior. As W. I. Thomas once said, "A situation defined as real is real in its consequences." Many adults, for example, perceive Halloween as filled with potential danger, and believe that their young children are vulnerable to sadistic strangers dispensing drug-tainted candy or apples laced with razor blades. The belief that such acts of Halloween sadism are widespread is, in fact, an urban legend with virtually no factual basis (Best and Horiuchi 1985). Nevertheless, millions of parents are convinced that the threat is genuine and, acting in terms of their definition of the situation, continue to inspect their children's treats for signs of tampering.

Symbolic interactionism's second assumption asserts that social action typically involves making a series of adjustments and readjustments

as an individual's interpretation of the situation changes. Interactionists reject the notion that behavior is the unmediated product of a variable or cause. Instead, they view action as something that is continually being built up, modified, re-directed, and transformed (Blumer 1969). People's initial definition of the situation is always subject to change, and as they redefine the situation their conduct changes accordingly. Effective teachers, for example, routinely interpret students' comments, facial expressions, and other gestures to determine whether the subject matter is being communicated clearly. They rely on this feedback to define and redefine the unfolding classroom situation and to make corresponding adjustments in their presentations. When students look confused, they may introduce a familiar example; if students' attention should wander, the instructors may call on them; and if students are visibly upset, they may ask to meet privately with them after class.

Third, interactionists assume that the meanings imputed to an object are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Meanings do not, in other words, simply reflect a quality or essence built into the very nature of an object. Other than its size and color, the cloth used to make handkerchiefs is virtually identical to that used to produce American flags. Though handkerchiefs and flags are sewn from the same physical material, the meanings attached to these two objects differ in dramatic ways. Rather than being intrinsic to an object, then, meanings are attributed to it by individuals, groups, and communities.

Elaborating this logic, some interactionists treat the self as an object whose meanings are socially constructed. In other words, the kind of person you assume yourself to be, and that others take you to be, mirror the meanings that individuals and groups have assigned to you. If, from a young age, family members, friends, and teachers have said you were "brilliant" and have acted toward you in a manner consistent with that characterization, then one assumption you are likely to make about yourself—one meaning that you are likely to assign to yourself—is that you are a highly intelligent person.

Fourth, symbolic interactionism holds that in modern, heterogeneous societies, different groups often assign divergent meanings to the "same" object. Contemporary societies contain a wide variety of groups (e.g., occupational, religious, age-based, racial and ethnic groups). Since group members interact and communicate frequently with one another, they tend to develop a common "universe of discourse" (Mead 1934) or

shared meanings about the objects comprising their social world. Not surprisingly, discrepancies are likely to arise between the distinctive systems of meanings devised by different groups. Parents and adolescents, for instance, commonly attach opposing meanings to curfews, underage drinking, and body piercing.

Discrepant meanings can be a significant source of social conflict, with rival groups mobilizing to insure that their definition of the situation is officially acknowledged and enforced by the larger society. A classic interactionist study discovered that Prohibition was largely a battle over the meanings assigned to drinking (Gusfield 1963). In the early twentieth century, small-town, middle-class, WASPS (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants) regarded drinking as sinful, while the working-class and largely Catholic immigrants from Southeastern Europe who settled in the nation's largest cities viewed drinking as an integral part of every-day life. More adept at organizing and lobbying politicians, the small-town Protestants succeeded in inscribing their interpretation into law: the Eighteenth Amendment, approved by Congress in 1919, outlawed (at least for a time) the manufacture and sale of alcoholic liquors.

Fifth, established meanings are always subject to transformation, and interactionists maintain that the emergence and diffusion of novel definitions of reality are a critically important feature of social change. At any given time, the meanings attached to some objects and practices are so entrenched that they appear natural and beyond question. Behavior that deviates sharply from these prescribed meanings is regarded as threatening, immoral, and even a little crazy. Interactionists examine how social movements, broad cultural shifts, and/or deviant individuals and groups sometimes challenge long-standing meanings and replace them with alternative conceptions of reality. From an interactionist perspective, one of the most significant consequences of the feminist movement is its redefinition of what it means to be a woman. A generation or two ago, it was simply assumed, particularly by members of the middle class and by women as well as men, that a woman's "proper place" was in the home taking care of her household, husband, and children. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, feminists questioned this assumption and ushered in a strikingly different conception of women, one that affirmed a woman's right to work outside the home and to be treated as an equal, in every respect, to her male colleagues. Today, feminism's once novel and radical definition of reality has been institutionalized and the

earlier view, which at the time was widely accepted and regarded as obvious and commonsensical, has now been redefined as an arbitrary infringement on women's freedom,

Functionalism

Functionalism is a macro perspective that examines the creation, maintenance, and alteration of durable social practices, institutions, and entire societies. Emile Durkheim, a great French sociologist who published several provocative books between 1890 and 1915, is often regarded as the classic founder of functionalism. This approach was articulated most forcefully, however, during the twenty-five years between 1945 and 1970 by a group of American sociologists, most of whom were trained at Harvard or Columbia. Key figures in this group include Robert Bellah, Robert Merton, Wilbert Moore, Talcott Parsons, Neil Smelser, and Robin Williams.

Functionalism assumes, first, that societies can be likened to problem-solving entities. If a society is to persist, functionalists argue, it must address a large (but not infinite) number of problems in a reasonably satisfactory way. (Functionalists sometimes refer to these problems as requirements, functions, prerequisites, or functional prerequisites.) An enduring society must, for example, socialize its youngest members, distribute food and other goods and services, and devise mechanisms to control deviance and contain conflict. If a society does not satisfactorily address these (and other) problems, it will experience considerable strain, and if its failure to address these problems continues, it will collapse.

Extending the metaphor that likens societies to problem-solving entities, functionalism portrays persisting practices and institutions as answers or solutions to the kinds of problems mentioned above. Customary practices and institutions are established to meet the problems every society must confront. Families and schools, for instance, are institutions that arise to answer the problem of socializing and educating the young; free markets, on the other hand, are created to address the problem of producing and distributing goods and services, while police and prisons are mechanisms for controlling deviance and containing conflict.

Second, functionalists assume that during the course of human history societies have developed many different answers to basic needs. This

assumption can be termed the principle of institutional alternatives. In traditional societies, for instance, the extended family had sole responsibility for supporting dependents, whether they be very young or very old, In many modern societies, however, insurance policies, pensions, social security, and welfare programs share responsibility for the problem of caring for dependents. From a functionalist perspective, these programs are institutional alternatives to the extended family.

The principle of institutional alternatives implies that any single functional prerequisite can be met in many different ways. Many functionalists argue, however, that, in an attempt to address prerequisites more efficiently and more effectively, modern societies have increasingly replaced multi-functional institutions with more specialized ones (Parsons 1977). Two hundred years ago, the family was a multi-functional institution in that it assumed primary responsibility for many different tasks, such as economic production, procreation, socialization, care for the infirm elderly, and social control. Today, however, many of these problems have been delegated to specialized institutions. Economic production, for instance, is no longer addressed by the family but by business enterprises located (for the most part) outside the home, while the control of deviance is a problem for specialized social control agents like the police and criminal courts. The family, too, has become a more specialized institution, one whose primary tasks include procreation, socialization of the very young, and emotional support for family members.

Third, functionalism presumes that the particular practices and institutions that arise in response to one problem have crucial repercussions for the practices and institutions devised to address other problems. A society, in other words, can be viewed as a system of practices and institutions. The notion that persisting practices or institutions are part of a larger system has led some functionalists to develop a distinctive protocol for studying the inter-relations between different parts of social systems. Referred to as functional analysis (Merton 1968), this method examines the effects a practice or institution has on other institutions and on the larger society. These effects or consequences assume four principal forms. Manifest functions refer to the consequences or objectives an institution explicitly attempts to achieve. Universities, for instance, are designed to impart knowledge and skills that will enable students to become productive workers and thoughtful citizens. Latent functions, on the other hand, identify effects that typically go unnoticed by the general

public and frequently appear unrelated or starkly incompatible with an institution's (or the larger society's) explicit objectives. For example, while many citizens routinely denounce crime, functionalists argue that it—or, more specifically, the condemnation crime provokes—has the important latent function of clearly defining and affirming a community's normative boundaries (i.e., its sense of right and wrong). Prisons, too, have a latent function: by serving as "schools of crime," they insure that many ex-prisoners will commit new crimes which, in turn, will elicit still more community outrage and additional affirmation of a society's moral code.

In addition to being either manifest or latent, the functions served by a practice or institution can be positive or negative. Positive functions are evident when an institution facilitates the operation of other institutions and/or contributes to the overall stability and effectiveness of the larger society. In this vein, Davis and Moore (1945) hypothesize that attaching unequal financial and social rewards to different occupations has the positive effect of attracting the most talented and qualified individuals to a society's most "functionally important" positions. Negative consequences, which are sometimes called "dysfunctions," occur when a practice or institution impedes the operation of other institutions and/or produces instability. For example, the "soft money" donated by corporations and other large contributors to political campaigns fosters the perception that contemporary politics is corrupt and convinces many citizens that their votes "don't count." That perception, moreover, is partially responsible for shockingly low rates of voter turnout.

Fourth, functionalism suggests that in contemporary societies containing scores of specialized institutions and hundreds of heterogenous sub-groups, societal integration is a recurring but manageable problem. In modern social orders, societal integration is achieved in two primary ways. First, specialized integrative institutions and processes—e.g., religious ceremonies, athletic contests, media events, and nationally celebrated holidays—heighten cohesion among people who otherwise share little in common. Second, consensus or agreement on such core values as individualism, freedom, achievement, and equal opportunity also serves to integrate complex societies. Incorporated into different institutions and internalized by individuals (during the course of their early socialization), shared values enable the diverse components of a large, differentiated society to co-exist and bond rather than dissolve into chronic chaos or a

"war of all against all." According to one prominent functionalist, the relative stability of American society over the last two hundred years (the Civil War being a glaring exception) is largely attributable to the continuing consensus on the values of achievement and liberty (Lipset 1979).

Fifth, functionalism asserts that deviance and conflict arise from social strains, or contradictions within an institution or between institutions. That is, the primary source of contention and crime are inconsistencies inherent in the social system itself. In an influential essay, Robert Merton (1938) contends that in American society everyone, regardless of his or her station in life, is encouraged to pursue the American Dream. At the same time, however, the institutional means (e.g., a quality education and well-connected friends or acquaintances on the job market) for attaining success are not equally distributed: middle- and upper-class people are, in general, much more likely to have access to these institutional means than are working-class people. Confronted with this contradiction between a cultural goal (i.e., success) and the institutional means (e.g., a quality education) to achieve it, some individuals and groups will turn to crime (e.g., selling drugs). Note that in Merton's terms, crime often involves using "innovative," illegal means to realize a cultural goal prized both by criminals and law-abiding citizens. Under certain conditions, the same contradiction between cultural goals and institutional means can prompt widespread rebellion, with various groups replacing established cultural goals and the standard, institutional means with radically different values and means.

The Conflict Perspective

Like functionalism, the conflict perspective is a macrosociological approach that examines the emergence, persistence, and transformation of long-standing practices, institutions, and societies. Karl Marx, whose work first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, is usually credited with crystallizing the key principles of this approach. Max Weber, an early twentieth-century German sociologist, is also recognized as a founding figure of conflict sociology. Leading contemporary conflict theorists include William Chambliss, Randall Collins, Ralf Dahrendorf, William Domhoff, and C. Wright Mills.

The conflict perspective rejects the functionalist notion that societies can be accurately portrayed as problem-solving entities. It also disputes the complementary idea that long-standing practices and institutions

represent reasonably satisfactory answers to problems and as such contribute to a society's general welfare. Conflict sociologists embrace a very different orienting assumption: societies are arenas in which groups with fundamentally antagonistic interests struggle against one another. Different theorists within this tradition differ in terms of which particular groups and struggles they emphasize. Marx, for instance, highlights the conflicts between social classes, while Weber focuses on competing status groups (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, age-based, etc.) and Dahrendorf and Collins draw attention to the battles between those who have authority and those subject to that authority. Despite disagreements about which groups and struggles are most important, all conflict sociologists believe that the interests that divide groups (whether classes, status groups, and so on) are built into the very fabric of a social order; these opposing interests are not readily negotiated, compromised, or resolved, nor can they be wished away or papered-over.

Second, conflicts among classes, status groups, and between those exercising authority and those subject to it supply the energy and the motivation for constructing and maintaining (as well as challenging and transforming) practices and institutions. Platt's (1977) well-known study of the origins of the juvenile court, for example, contends that this institution was created (in 1899) by social and economic elites and was employed to target and control the children of working-class immigrants residing in large cities. Conflict sociologists argue that today the nation's newly constructed maximum security prisons are, in practice, reserved predominantly for young, minority males raised in inner-city areas where good jobs are scarce (Chambliss 1999). On the other hand, white-collar, middle-class criminals, if they receive a prison sentence at all, are rarely housed in these types of facilities.

Third, the conflict perspective characterizes on-going practices and institutions as structures of domination that promote the interests of a relatively powerful, superordinate group while subverting the interests of relatively powerless, subordinate groups, even though the latter are usually much larger, numerically, than the powerful elites. Consequently, this perspective's orienting question is: which group's interests are served by a specific practice or institution? Kozol's (1991) investigation of how public schools are funded found that schools located in well-to-do suburban areas receive substantially more support than inner-city schools, which often lack textbooks, desks, and even serviceable plumbing. Far from enabling students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to compete fairly on a level playing field, the current school system simply reflects and reproduces existing class inequalities.

Fourth, the conflict perspective reconceptualizes what functionalism terms values as ideologies. The primary purpose of an ideology is to protect and promote the distinctive interests of a particular class (or status or authority group). This legitimating purpose is best served when the ideology is presented in universal terms; when its ideas are stated as if they apply to everyone equally. According to the conflict approach, achievement and equal opportunity are most accurately viewed not as widely shared values but as a dominant ideology that operates to preserve (and reproduce) existing systems of inequality. In essence, the ideology of achievement and equal opportunity asserts that individuals and groups with great wealth, prestige, and power are rightfully entitled to these rewards because they have sacrificed, worked hard, and/or displayed exceptional talent. This ideology also explains why many people have few or none of these rewards: they are lazy, unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary for success, and/or lack the requisite talent. This ideology justifies the unequal distribution of social rewards by referring to individuals' character and moral virtues (or lack thereof). At the same time, it draws attention away from the structural inequities that largely explain why members of some groups are much more likely to "succeed" than are members of other groups.

Fifth, the conflict approach holds that significant social change usually reflects the efforts of groups mobilizing to advance their collective interests, often at the expense of other groups' interests. In this regard, proponents of conflict sociology question the functionalist claim that the substantial financial rewards enjoyed by physicians are due to the fact that medical doctors perform tasks that are, objectively, of great functional importance to society. Physicians' impressive incomes are more persuasively explained, conflict sociologists contend, with the observation that the American medical profession has established, in effect, a monopoly on the provision of health care (Starr 1982). Prior to 1850, this monopoly did not exist, and physicians were poorly paid and given little esteem. After the Civil War, however, doctors began to organize in earnest, and by the late nineteenth century they secured legislation prohibiting other groups and individuals from providing health care. The exclusion of competitors paved the way for a remarkable surge in doctors' income and a parallel rise in their prestige.