Section 2: Ten Tools for Applying Sociology

CHAPTER 2.3: APPLYING THEORIES

QUICK START: In this chapter, you will learn

- Why theory is an important, practical tool.

- The theories of functionalism, conflict theory and interactionism.

- To apply these theories simultaneously, all at once, to explain why something happens.

- To demonstrate sociological imagination and creativity in solving problems by using theories.

TERMS

Functionalism   The explanation of social interaction that, in short, states that society is a system that strives for balance. The interdependent parts of the system, such as institutions or roles, exist because they provide a function.

Conflict Theory   The explanation of social interaction that, in short, states that society is the result and cause of conflict. Contrasting values and desires to possess social resources explains social behavior.

Interactionism   The explanation of social interaction that, in short, states that people create and change society through social interaction.

Equilibrium   Balance between the parts of a social system.

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Social Functions   Productive consequences of patterns of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior on the normative operations of society.

Social Dysfunctions   Disruptive consequences of patterns of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior on societal operations.

Manifest Function   The intentional consequence or purpose of a social pattern.

Latent Function   The unintended consequence or purpose of a social pattern.

Social Class   A group of people who share a socioeconomic position or status.

Subordination   Dominating another person through the use of power.

Exploitation   Using other people for personal or collective gain.

Oppression   The process by which people with vast social resources make people without them powerless to change their social conditions.

Alienation   The process by which exploited and oppressed people are separated from their humanity or from their true human potential. They come to feel alien in their lives and society.

False Consciousness   The state of not knowing that you, and the group you belong to, are being alienated and exploited.

Identity   More than personality, this is who we think we are. Our notion of our self, which is constantly a work in progress.

Shared Meanings   Collective ways that we define things such that we are able to know how we should interact with others, and we know how others will interact with us.

Expectations   Our presumptions concerning how people will act, think, feel or say based on their role, power, prestige, wealth or status.

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Taking the Role of Other   The process through which people see the world through another person or another group's perspective or position.

TOPICS

You don't need us to tell you that societies are complicated things. Sociologists try to make sense of society. Like other sciences, sociology builds theories to help explain how society operates. Theory often gets a bad rap. People often think of theory as, at best, boring, and at worse, useless. What we would like to do in this chapter is change your mind about the practical value of theory. We think that, even if you never take another class in sociology, sociological theory can empower your life. Theories explain life and help us makes sense of what's going on. As such, theories are really tools. They provide frameworks for understanding, and frameworks for change.

Social theories provide "road maps" that help us understand how society works. Simply speaking, how are we going to fix societal problems if we don't know how society works? When we look at the complexity of society we look at millions and perhaps billions of individual people. And yet, despite these large numbers, most people behave in patterned ways. They act more similarly than they do differently. Why and how does this happen? Sociology addresses this question, with an array of theories, which many sociologists categorize into three general theoretical perspectives: **functionalism**, **conflict theory**, and **interactionism**. Most sociologists blend these three perspectives when trying to explain social life. Here we provide a quick review of each perspective's focus and concepts.

	Overview	Concepts
Functionalism	Sees society as a system that strives for balance. The interdependent parts of the system, such as institutions or roles, exist because they provide a function. Systems change by discarding parts that don't work, by adapting to new needs, or by becoming more complex. The need for groups and society to maintain social stability explains social behavior.	**Equilibrium** **Social Functions** **Social Dysfunctions** **Manifest Function** **Latent Function** Social Forces Institutions
Conflict Theory	Society is the result and cause of conflict. Contrasting values, and desire to possess and subsequently compete for social resources, explain social behavior.	**Social Class** Power **Subordination** **Exploitation** **Oppression** **Alienation** **False Consciousness**
Interactionism	People create and change society through social interaction. How people define and experience social interactions explains social behavior.	**Identity** **Shared Meanings** **Expectations** Roles Social Interaction **Taking the Role of Other**

TOOLS

As complex as human society is, using one or more of these theories can give us a grasp on what is happening and what could happen in our society. Theories are not just vague, passive generalizations – they help explain social action at all levels. Let's take a problem in the news a lot lately: flight delays. We can use our three sociological theories to explain why this problem occurs. Recently, in response to airline passenger complaints about airport delays, airline executives added more flights. Six months later, airport delays and passenger complaints reached

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an all time low. It seems that the airlines are clearly to blame for these problems. But, what is the real problem here? First let's take a functionalist view.

Functionalism would see a gap between a system and needs. Increasing flights is not easy, even in a good economy. It requires more airports, with more space to land, and more resources to control increased air traffic. Airports are relatively fixed systems. It is difficult and costly to increase the amount of airports. So when airlines respond to customer demand by scheduling more flights, the system becomes clogged, creating more delays. The system has become dysfunctional. Given this context, what can airlines do? Perhaps it is time to change the system by building a new airport, or updating the computer systems that manage air traffic. Or perhaps the airlines could try changing passenger needs by providing more information about delays, or more services in airports for delayed passengers such as workstations, Internet access, meal vouchers, mini-massages, or movies to watch.

Rather than a gap between system and needs, we might suspect that the airline companies are taking advantage of passengers whom they know can do little when delays occur. When an airline announces a delay, passengers could, theoretically, forgo their seat on that plane and buy a ticket for another flight. This option only really exists in larger cities where more than one or two airlines service the airport. Even in large cities, most passengers could or would not respond to a delay by purchasing a new ticket because airlines dramatically increase the cost of tickets purchased within two weeks of the flight. So, the only practical response for passengers in larger cities is to wait for their next trip and purchase tickets on another airline with a better delay record. Even this option may not work as most airlines experience delays. Passengers living in smaller cities can respond by arranging car or train transportation for their next trip, if possible.

Further, we might point to the influence airlines have on the building of new airports. Seeing the problem of persistent runway delays in this way would be adopting a conflict perspective. Conflict theory sees problems as a clash between people or groups with power to exploit or oppress others. Given this context, what can airlines do? Conflict theory would push us to instead ask what consumers can do. They could organize their efforts and present a unified case to the airline executives. Collectively, consumers have much more power than do individual consumers to affect change. They could boycott air travel, picket outside airports across the country to bring more attention to the problem, or even try to start their own company which treated passengers with more respect.

Finally, we could see the problem of runway delays in the eyes of an interactionist. Interactionism looks at how actors define situations and at what influences these definitions. In this case, most consumers define the situation as a problem created by the airlines. What influences this belief? Why don't they blame bad weather? They may have heard about this problem in the news, and from friends and family. What information is presented, and how it is presented, influences how people define situations. For example, if flight delays receive a great deal of media coverage, and if most of the coverage highlights passenger suffering and airline

mistakes, then consumers may grow increasingly discontent. They themselves may have experienced no serious hardship due to flight delays, but they may take the role of other, and identify with those that do. Given this context, what can airlines and consumers do? Interactionism would encourage the two groups to discuss the problems together, and to try and understand each other's perspective. Then, from this understanding, owners and consumers could construct a mutually agreed upon solution.

TASKS

By now you've probably realized that the choice of your theoretical tool will have an impact on what you do. No doubt you noticed that using multiple theories might get you a better picture of what's going on. In an applied setting, in which our goal is to solve a real life problem, our first step is to choose a theory or theories that give us the best explanation of the situation. Below are some exercises to help you understand and use sociological theory.

- Your client is a local public high school with declining SAT scores. Large percentages of children who attend this school are from one-parent homes, and many are children of color. Use each theoretical perspective to explain the decline in SAT scores and to make suggestions on how to improve the scores. Use the table below to guide your thinking.

Tool	✔	What is it? How do I do it?
Functionalism		1. Start with this basic assumption: Society is a set of interdependent parts. 2. Choose a social situation. 3. What are the needs of this situation? That is, what is supposed to be done here? 4. Think about this situation is a system. Ask yourself: What are the parts that make up the system? What function does each part serve? What are the parts relationships with the other parts? 5. Draw a diagram inside the needs circle with arrows that show the connections between the social parts. 6. Are there any "gaps" between what is supposed to happen and what the system is able to do?

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Tool	✔	What is it? How do I do it?
Conflict Theory		1. Start with this basic assumption: Conflict is frequent and social change is certain. 2. Choose a social situation. 3. What groups have more power to control other people and the outcomes of the situation? List them. 4. What values, interests, goals does the group have in this situation? 5. What groups have less power and less influence over the outcomes? What values, interests, goals does the group have in this situation? 6. Does the group with power think they can achieve their goals? Does the group without power think they can achieve their goals?
Interactionist Theory		1. Start with this basic assumption: Societies and persons in them are guided by the way things are collectively defined. 2. Select a social situation. 3. What are the different definitions of this situation? What are the characteristics of the people holding these different definitions? 4. What influences their definitions? 5. How does their definition influence how they behavior in daily social life? 6. How does it influence how they interact together? 7. How do these definitions influence how people act?