University of the People

[SOC 1502](https://my.uopeople.edu/course/view.php?id=7981#section-1) Introduction to Sociology

Unit 2 Written Assignment 2

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Sociological Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, Marriage, and Family

**Introduction**

Sociology offers various theoretical perspectives to analyze and interpret social issues and constructs. This essay will examine how the functionalist, symbolic interactionist, and conflict perspectives approach race & ethnicity, gender & sexuality, and marriage & family. By understanding the core concepts of each perspective and evaluating their strengths and limitations, we gain insight into the complex dynamics shaping these fundamental aspects of society.

Functionalism

Functionalism views society as a system of interconnected parts that work together to maintain social stability (Conerly et al., 2024). From this perspective:

- Racial and ethnic diversity can be seen as contributing to the overall functioning of society, with different groups fulfilling various social roles. However, critics argue this downplays the historical and ongoing inequities faced by minority groups (Crossman, 2019).

- Gender roles and expressions are interpreted as serving specific functions to uphold the social order. Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are reinforced. Functionalists may justify gender inequalities as necessary for societal stability.

- The nuclear family unit is deemed essential for reproducing cultural values, socializing children, and providing emotional and economic support. Alternative family structures are seen as potentially disruptive.

Example: Functionalists might explain the persistence of the gender wage gap as a reflection of men's traditional role as the primary breadwinner, which maintains familial and economic stability, even as women increasingly enter the workforce.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals create meaning through their interactions with others (Conerly et al., 2024). This micro-level perspective illuminates:

- How racial and ethnic identities are socially constructed and negotiated through everyday interactions and symbolic exchanges. Stereotypes and prejudices are learned and reinforced (Ritzer, 2021).

- The ways in which gender and sexual identities are performed and interpreted within specific social contexts. People adopt and subvert gender norms through their self-presentation and relationships.

- The changing symbolic significance of marriage and family as individuals redefine these institutions through their intimate interactions and household arrangements.

Example: Interactionists would study how same-sex couples navigate symbolic rituals like weddings or naming conventions to legitimize their unions in the face of societal heteronormativity.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory examines how power imbalances and competing interests between groups shape social structures and relationships (Conerly et al., 2024). This perspective emphasizes:

- The ways dominant racial and ethnic groups maintain their privilege and oppress subordinate groups through institutional discrimination and ideological justifications. Racism is seen as a tool for preserving the status quo (Crossman, 2019).

- How patriarchal systems and gender hierarchies are reproduced to benefit men at the expense of women. The intersection of gender with other forms of oppression is highlighted (Collins, 2019).

- The role of marriage and family in perpetuating class inequalities and power dynamics. Issues like domestic violence and unequal divisions of household labor are framed as reflections of larger societal conflicts.

Example: Conflict theorists would interpret high rates of poverty among single mothers as a result of the gender and racial discrimination they face in the labor market, combined with inadequate social supports for families.

**Strengths and Limitations**

Each perspective offers valuable insights but also has limitations:

- Functionalism provides a big-picture view of how social institutions are interconnected, but it can be overly deterministic and neglect individual agency. It also tends to justify the status quo (Ritzer, 2021).

- Symbolic interactionism captures the nuances of how social identities and meanings are constructed and negotiated, but it may overlook larger structural constraints on behavior.

- Conflict theory highlights power dynamics and inequalities, but it can be overly pessimistic and reductionistic, neglecting instances of cooperation and consensus.

Ultimately, a comprehensive sociological analysis should draw upon multiple perspectives to gain a holistic understanding (Collins, 2019).

**Personal Reflection**

In my view, conflict theory is particularly compelling for understanding persistent social inequalities. Growing up as a non-local and witnessing the challenges faced by my immigrant family, I saw firsthand how systemic barriers limited our opportunities. While symbolic interactionism helps me make sense of how we coped with and resisted these constraints in our daily lives, conflict theory provides a framework for critiquing and dismantling oppressive social structures. At the same time, functionalism reminds me to consider how even problematic institutions may serve unacknowledged purposes that need to be fulfilled in more equitable ways.

**Conclusion**

The functionalist, symbolic interactionist, and conflict perspectives offer distinct and complementary lenses for analyzing race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, marriage, and family. Together, they illuminate the complex interplay between individual experiences, cultural meanings, and structural inequalities. By critically engaging with these perspectives—acknowledging both their insights and limitations—sociologists can develop nuanced understandings of social issues and work toward envisioning and creating more just and inclusive societies.

**References**

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