The Three Sociological Paradigms

A paradigm (perspective/approach/theory) is a description of the world of human behavior; it is a description of society. A paradigm is a description of the interactions of human beings within any society. Paradigms are broad viewpoints or perspectives that permit social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories. Paradigms do not do anything but DESCRIBE! They analyze based on their descriptions. That is all they do. They are scientific tools. Paradigms cannot occur or happen! Societies are not Conflictualist, Functionalist, or Symbolic Interactionist. People and social events are not based on paradigms: a paradigm is a viewpoint, a perspective, a guiding principal, a belief system. Paradigms cannot be proven or disproven, but they lead to the development of theories which are provable.

The Conflict Paradigm

The Conflict paradigm does a very good job of explaining racism, sexism, ageism, socioeconomic inequality (wealth and poverty), etc.

The Conflict paradigm describes the inequalities that exist in all societies around the globe. Conflict is particularly interested in the inequalities that exist based on all of the various aspects of master status—race or ethnicity, sex or gender, age, religion, ability or disability, and SES. SES is an abbreviation of socioeconomic status and is comprised of the combined effects of income, education, and occupation. Every society is plagued by inequality based on social differences among the dominant group and all of the other groups in society, according to the Conflict paradigm. When we are analyzing any element of society from this perspective, we need to look at the structures of wealth, power, and status and the ways in which those structures maintain the social, economic, political, and coercive power of one group at the expense of all other groups.

The Functionalist Paradigm
(Structural Functionalism)

The Functionalist paradigm describes society as stable and describes all of the various mechanisms that maintain social stability. Functionalism argues that the social structure is responsible for all stability and instability, and that that the social structure is continuously attempting to maintain social equilibrium (balance) among all of the components of society. Functionalism argues that a stable society is the best possible society and any element that helps to maintain that stability must add to the adaptability (functionality) of society. This is a macro-level paradigm that describes large-scale processes and large- scale social systems; it is uninterested in individual behavior.

The Functionalist paradigm does a very good job of explaining the ways in which the institutions of society (the family, education, religion, law/politics/government, the economy, medicine, media) work together to create social solidarity (a social contract in which society as a whole agrees upon the rules of social behavior and agrees, more or less, to abide by those rules) and to maintain balance in society.

Functionalism, describes the elements in society that create social stability FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER OF PEOPLE. This paradigm, like the Conflict paradigm, is very

interested in the structure of society and how it impacts people's lives. However, Functionalism sees the social structure as creating equilibrium or balance. It also describes the various elements of society that maintain that balance. One of its basic premises is that society is structured to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Unfortunately, this perspective ignores minorities and is unable to explain inequality except to say that it must have a social function—it must make society more adaptable—simply because inequality has always existed. Functionalism describes, analyzes, and is interested in any social element that maintains the status quo—keeps things as they are—and maintains social balance between and among all of the institutions of society (the family, education, religion, law/politics/government, the economy, medicine, and media).

The Symbolic Interactionist Paradigm

Symbolic Interactionism describes society as small groups of individuals interacting based on the various ways that people interpret their various cultural symbols such as spoken, written, and non-verbal language. Our behavior with and among other people (our interaction) is the result of our shared understanding of cultural symbols. This is a micro-level paradigm that describes small-scale processes and small-scale social systems; it is interested in individual behavior.

The most important aspect of the Symbolic Interactionist paradigm is not so much that it is interested in small groups—although that is of great importance—as its interest in the interpretation of cultural symbols. For Symbolic Interactionism, everything in society is based on how we interpret our cultural symbols—media images, language, stereotypes, perceptions, and belief systems.

Symbolic Interactionism does a very good job of explaining how various forms of language (including the images and the messages in the media) shape our interactions with one another and reinforce stereotypes.

India's Sacred Cow: A Functionalist View.

To an American tourist in India, the Hindu prohibition against slaughtering cows appears an ignorant belief that stands in the way of progress. The cattle browse unhindered in street markets eating oranges and mangoes while people compete for the meager food supplies.

Why is there such devotion to the cow or zebu--the large-humped species found throughout Asia and Africa? The simple explanation is that it is an integral part of Hinduism. Yet we know that many Indian people are often on the edge of starvation. Why does this practice--which appears to be manifestly dysfunctional-- persist from century to century?

Economists, agronomists, and social scientists have found that such cow worship is highly functional for Indian society. For example, the zebus perform the essential tasks of plowing the fields and producing milk. If eating meat were permitted, families might be tempted to slaughter cows for immediate consumption. This would leave them susceptible to eventual ruin. In addition, zebus produce dung which is recovered as fuel for cooking and fertilizer. American scientists are attempting to replicate this practice to help our society cope with the need for more energy sources.

Finally, the prohibition against slaughtering cows serves the function of assisting India's poor. According to tradition, even zebus cannot be eaten. Yet untouchables (members of India's lowest status group) eat this beef in the secrecy of their homes. Thus, the prohibition against beef eating restricts consumption by, most of the population, while allowing the poorest sections to obtain vitally needed nutrients otherwise missing in their diets.

The tourist returns to the United States with stories about the "ignorant" Indians. In reality it is the tourist who is ignorant of how functional cow worship is for the Indian cu1ture--and how the West is now learning from the wisdom of Indian traditions (see Marvin Harris, Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches, New York: Random House, 1974:11-32; Human Nature 1 [February 1978]:28-36).

Functionalist View of Popular Music.

Just as the functionalist and conflict perspectives are applied to sport Box 1-2 (p. 20), also popular music can be analyzed using these sociological approaches.

Functionalist view. Popular music, though intended primarily to entertain people, also serves certain functions. For example: Popular music brings people together. The patriotic song "Over There" united Americans during World War I. More recently, while Iran held 53 American hostages during 1980 and 1981, Americans remembered them with yellow ribbons, and Tony Orlando's song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree" achieved a new surge of popularity. For another example: Popular music promotes many types of social values. The long tradition of gospel music suggests that faith in Jesus Christ will lead to salvation. In the 1960s, the Beatles told us that "All You Need is Love." Then, during the era" of the Vietnamese war, they asked that we "Give Peace a Chance." Popular music reinforces social traditions. Love is regarded in the United States as being essential to happiness. In 1955, we were told that "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing." Then in 1984 Pat Benatar sang that "Love is a Battlefield" and we heard she was "trapped" by love.

Conflict View of Popular Music.

Conflict view. Popular music can reflect the values of a particular age group and therefore intensify the battle between the generations. Folksinger Bob Dylan's "The Times Are A Changing'" warned older people to get out of the way of the younger generation if they couldn't understand it. Much of punk and new wave music (and costumes) is designed to shock conventional society and reflect the sense of alienation and outrage that its enthusiasts feel.

Popular music can also represent a direct political assault on established institutions. The Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" attacks the British monarchy. Dolly Parton's "Nine to Five," the theme song of the popular film, protests mistreatment of female secretaries by male supervisors. Many of the reggae songs of Bob Marley and the Wailers, such as "Burnin' and Lootin,'" endorse a revolution in Jamaica.

Clearly, there is more to popular music than simply entertainment. Most songs have lyrics which carry explicit messages of one sort or another. From the functionalist approach, popular music reinforces societal values, while the conflict theorist’s sees popular music as another reflection of the political and social struggles within a society.

(See R. Serge Denisoff and Ralph Washman, Introduction to Sociology [3d ed.], New York: Macmillan, 1983:22-26).

Interactionalist View of Sidewalk Etiquette.

Ervin Goffman (Relations in Public, New York: Basic Books, 1971:9-18) offers a new look at sidewalk behavior drawing upon the interactions approach. When we sit behind the wheel of a car and begin driving, we are confronted immediately with many rules which govern our behavior. Society provides us with reminders of these rules--traffic lights, stop signs, speed limit signs, white lines marking lanes, and ultimately, police officers.

Interestingly, pedestrians also abide by certain mutual understandings of proper behavior in traffic. We may not have read a book of rules of the sidewalk or been formally taught them, and we do not need to worry about getting a ticket for "walking too fast." Nevertheless, we learned certain social standards for pedestrian behavior which are a part of our culture.

Traffic on the sidewalk sorts itself into two opposite-going sides. The dividing line is near the middle of the sidewalk, yet it can shift quickly when traffic bunches in one direction. As in street traffic in the United States, pedestrians tend to walk to the right side of the dividing line. Those who are walking more slowly generally stay nearer the buildings, while those pedestrians in a hurry move nearer the curb.

The workability of lane and passing rules is based on two subtle practices: "externalization" and "scanning." When we externalize, we use body gestures to show people which way we are heading. Scanning involves moving our line of sight to observe people coming in our direction and to confirm the forward progress of those pedestrians immediately ahead of us. A person's scanning range is usually three or four sidewalk squares if the street is crowded and more if few walkers are present.

In order to avoid small objects and unpleasant or contaminated spots, we practice "sidestepping." George Orwell (Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1950:15) observed an interesting example of this practice in Burma. An Indian prisoner was walking between two guards on the way to his execution. He came near a small puddle and sidestepped momentarily out of the path in order to avoid it. This little act points out the often unconscious nature of sidestepping.

If a collision with another pedestrian seems imminent, we attempt to create immediate eye contact. The hope is to quickly indicate a new route and avoid crashing into each other. This is a frequent practice when crossing the street in a busy intersection. It can be argued that, given such pedestrian routing customs, the individual effectively becomes a vehicular unit. He or she is expected to conform too many unstated, yet socially agreed-upon standards.