

Racial and Ethnic Relations: A Sociological Viewpoint

To grasp the dynamics and inequalities of our society, one must examine the relations of race and ethnicity. The principal sociological theories—functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist—provide various frameworks for comprehending these relationships.

Of all these perspectives, the conflict perspective offers the most powerful framework for analyzing racial and ethnic inequality. It makes us concentrate more intently on the unfair power distribution in our society and compels us to look at the structures that enforce this unfair distribution. We have been encouraged to probe these structures more deeply and to examine how they lead to all manner of inequality — especially racial and ethnic inequality — in our society. The critical takeaways from each sociological viewpoint will be highlighted in this essay. The focus will be on showing why the conflict perspective is the best possible tool for understanding and revealing the kinds of systemic injustices that run through society.

The functionalist view of society considers it a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain stability. Seen this way, diversity should produce social cohesion. After all, if you have different kinds of groups in society, they should do the different kinds of things that make society work, right? Put another way, in a functionally diverse society, the functions of the variety should lead to "the peace and blessed order" that makes diverse societies hold together. Of course, if some of us are privileged, and if some of us are in groups that are less privileged, then that might humor both sides of the presidential campaign (Kendall, 2022).

The conflict perspective that came from the thought of Karl Marx emphasizes how social structures are built to maintain competition for resources. Powerful groups manipulate those structures and resources for their benefit. From this perspective, sociology is a tool for maintaining the social order. For Ashley (2022), racial and ethnic inequalities, like others in society, ensure the power, privileges, and prestigious resources of a small elite group over the most part of society. Those same privileged groups keep a large part of society down so that they, the privileged, can play on easy mode and maintain their appearance of ascending to a level of power that all can see and admire.

On the other hand, symbolic interactionism draws our attention to the scale of almost intimate interactions that constitute and carry forth racial and ethnic identities. Interactionists favor a perspective on the use of language, symbols, and meanings shared between people to create and sustain social identities. For them, media and conversation create the "powerful stereotypes" that really do make a person act "as if he were more truly a member of one or another of these racial categories than if we had not merely talked him into it, but had brainwashed him" (Kendall, 2022).

Overall, the perspective of conflict appears to be the most convincing of the many ways there are to understand the relations of race and ethnicity. Its emphasis on how power is wielded and on systemic inequality focuses attention on how the dominant groups in society manage to maintain control over most of the resources and, not so incidentally, a fair amount of the influence as well. What is valuable about the conflict perspective is that it does hold these dominant groups accountable and calls into question the arrangements of society that allow these groups to act as if they are in charge.

References

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