**Sociological Perspectives**

Sociological theory comes in a variety of shapes and size. Mostly sociologist conduct study at macro and micro level.

**Macro Level:** Macro level looks at society on a large scale. It focus on large scale processes, social structure and their interrelation.

**Meso Level:** Between macro and micro, there is meso level of analysis that focuses on experience of group and interaction between groups such as organization, community, family.

**Micro Level:** Micro level sociology looks at small scale interactions between individuals in specific situation. How people interact with one another in small groups or in one-on-one situation e.g. relation between teacher and student.

Theories in sociology provide us with different perspectives with which to view our social world. A perspective is simply a way of looking at the world. A theory is a set of interrelated propositions or principles designed to answer a question or explain a particular phenomenon; it provides us with a perspective. Sociological theories help us to explain and predict the social world in which we live

**A sociological perspective is simple a way of looking at society and understanding society**.

Imagined there are five people looking at the same busy shopping street- a pickpocket, a police officer, a road sweeper, a shopper and a shopkeeper. The pickpocket sees wallets sticking out of pockets or bags, and an opportunity to steal. The police officer sees potential crime and disorder. The road sweeper see litter and garbage left by everyone else. The shopper might see windows full of desirable consumer goods to buy, and the shopkeeper sees different aspects of that street. What they see will depend on their “perspective” – what they are looking for. They might all be seeing different things, but you can’t really say any one of their views is more correct than others- though you might think some views provide a more truthful, rounded and fuller description of the street than others do. In simple words, sociological perspective is the lens that an individual chooses to view the society from.

Sociological perspectives are basically similar, in that they are the different viewpoints from which sociologists examine society. We might say that different sociological perspectives, and the different research methods they lead to, simple emphasize and explain different aspects of society.

Sociological Perspectives center on the theme of how much freedom or control the individual has to influence society and there are two main approaches here:

* The sociology of system, often referred to as **structuralism**
* The sociology of action- **social action or interpretivist theories.**

**Structuralism:**

Structuralism is concerned with the overall structure of society, and the way social institutions, like the family, the education system, the mass media and work, act as a constraint, or limit and control individual behavior. According to structuralism, individual is molded, shaped and constrained by society through socialization, positive and negative sanctions, and material resources like income and jobs. Form structuralist perspective, the individual is like a puppet, whose strings are pulled by society.

**Determinism** means that the activities of individuals are moulded by forces beyond their control, and they have little control or choice in how they behave.

There are two main varieties of structuralism: Structural Functionalism and Social Conflict/Marxism

1. **Structural Functionalism Approach**

The functionalist perspective is based largely on the works of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton, August Comte, Emile Durkheim.

**Structural functional approach is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability**.

According to functionalism, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society’s skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power.

As its name suggests, this approach points to **social structure, any relatively stable pattern of social behavior.** Social structures give our life shape- in families, the workplace, the classroom, and the community. This approach also looks for a **structure’s social functions, the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole.** All social structure from a simple handshake to complex religious rituals, functions to keep society going, at least in its present form.

English sociologist **Herbert Spencer** use the analogy of human body to explain society. For example, in order to understand the importance of the heart, lungs and brain in the human body, we need to understand what function or purpose each carries out and how they work together in providing and maintaining the basic needs of human life. Similarly, functionalists argue that any society has certain functional prerequisites (certain basic needs or requirements) that must be met if society is to survive, such as the protection of food, the care of the young, and the socialization of new generations into the culture of society. Social institutions like family or education exist to meet these basic needs, in the same way as we have a heart and lungs to refresh and pump blood around our bodies. Like all parts of body work together to the maintenance of body, so, according to functionalist sociology, social institutions meet functional prerequisites, maintaining the system and order and stability in society.

Robert K. Merton expanded our understanding of social function by pointing out that any social structure has many functions, some more obvious than others. He distinguished between Manifest functions and latent functions. **Manifest functions** are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. **Latent functions** are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to transmit knowledge and skills to society’s youth. But public elementary schools also serve as babysitters for employed parents, and colleges offer a place for young adults to meet potential mates. The baby-sitting and mate-selection functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence they are latent functions.

Merton also recognized that the effects of social structure are not all good, and certainly not good for everyone. Thus a **social dysfunction** is any social pattern that may disrupt the operation of society.

Moreover, From**Talcott Parsons**view, all parts of a social system are interrelated performing four basic functions.

* + - Adaptation to the environment
    - Goal attainment
    - Integrating members into harmonious units
    - Maintaining basic cultural patterns

**Critical View**: In mid 1900s, most sociologists favored the structural functionalism approach. In recent decades, however, its influence declined. By focusing on social stability and unity, critics point out, structural functionalism ignores inequalities of social class, and gender, which cause tension and conflict in society,

1. **Social Conflict Approach/ Marxism**

It is a macro-oriented paradigm

**The social conflict approach is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change.**

*Karl Marx* was the main proponent of this perspective. Others were c. Wright Mills, Ralph Dharendorf.

Unlike structural functional emphasis on solidarity and stability, this approach highlights inequality and change. Derived from the work of Karl Marx, conflict theory pictures society as fragmented into groups that compete for social and economic resources. Social order ismaintained by domination, not consensus, with power in the hand of those with the greatest political, economic, and social resources. Groups and individuals struggle over control of societal resources, trying to advance their own interest. Those with the more resources exercise power over the others; inequality is the result.

Marxism sees the overall structure of society primarily determined by economic system- the means of production, such as land, factories and offices necessary to produce society’s goods.

Theses means of production are privately owned, and most people depend on the owners for employment. Marx called this economic system as capitalist economic system. Marx argued that workers produce more than is needed for employers to pay them their wages- this extra produced by workers is what Marx called Surplus Value, and provides profit for the employer. The workers who produce extra products do not get the full value of their worl, and they are therefore being exploited.

**Capitalists and workers:**

Marx argues that there were two basic social classes in capitalist industrial society; a small, wealthy and powerful class of owners of the means of productions, (which he called the bourgeoisie or capitalists- the owning class. And a much larger, poorer class of non-owners (which he called the proletariat or working class). The proletariat, because they owned no means of production of their own, had no means of living than to sell their labor to bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage or salary. The capitalists exploited working class, by making profits out of them by keeping wages as low as possible instead of giving the workers the full payment for the goods they’d produced.

**Class Conflict:**

Marx argues this exploitation created major differences in interest between the two classes, and this created conflict. For example, the workers interest lay in higher wages to achieve a better lifestyle, but these would be at expense of the bosses’ profits. The bosses wanted higher profits to expand their businesses and wealth, but this could only be achieved by keeping wages as low as possible. The interest of these two classes are therefore totally opposed, and this generates conflict between two classes and this conflict would affect all areas of life.

**The ruling class:**

Marx argues that owning class is also ruling class. Because they owned means of production, the bourgeoisie could decide where factories should be located, and whether they should be opened or closed down, and they could control the workforce through hiring or firing. Democratically elected governments could not afford to ignore this power of bourgeoisie, otherwise they might face rising unemployment or other social problems if bourgeoisie decided not to invest its money.

**Dominant Ideology:**

Marx believed that ruling ideas in any society, what he called dominant ideology, were those of ruling class (hence it is sometimes also called ruling class ideology) and the major institutions in society reflected those ideas.

Marx argued that law protect interest of ruling class and religion act as opium of the people, persuading the working class to accept their position as just and natural by promising future rewards in heaven for putting up with their present sufferings; the bourgeoisie ownership of mass media meant only their ideas were put forward. In this way, working class were almost brainwashed into accepting their position. They failed to recognize they were being exploited and therefore did not rebel against bourgeoisie.

**Marx called this lack of awareness y working class of their own interests as False Consciousness**

Marx thought that one day the circumstances would arise in which the workers did become aware of their exploitation and develop class consciousness. **Class Consciousness is an awareness in members of a social class of their real interest and their exploitations.**

The workers would join together to act against bourgeoisie through strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest. This would eventually lead to a revolution against and overthrow of the bourgeoisie. The mass of production would then be put in the hands of state and run in interest of everyone, not just of the bourgeoisie. A new type of society- Communism- would be created, which would be without exploitation, without classes, and without class conflict. Marx therefore saw society as based on exploitation of one large class by a small group of owners, creating social classes with opposing interest and inequalities of wealth and power in society.

**Critical Review:**

* It largely ignores how shared values and interdependence can generate unity among members of a society.
* Critics say, this approach pursue political goals, they cannot claim scientific objectivity.
* They paint society in broad strokes-in terms of family, social class, race and so on.

**Social action or Interpretivist theories**

Individual behavior in everyday social situations is the main focus of these approaches.

**Social action or interpretivist theories are concerned with discovering and thereby understanding the processes by which interactions between people take place, how people come to interpret and see things as they do, and how the reactions of others can affect their view of things.**

Society and social structures/institutions are seen as the creation of individuals. An emphasis is place on the free will of people to do things, rather than the determinism of structuralism.

An emphasis is placed on the individual and everyday behavior rather than the overall structure of society. The focus is on individual s and small groups of people, not on the social structure as a whole.

People’s behavior is viewed as being driven by the meanings they give to situations; their definition or the way they see things and therefore behave, become very important.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

The structural functionalism and social conflict approach share a macro level orientation, a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole. Sociology also uses micro level orientation, a close up focus on social interaction in specific situations.

**Symbolic Interactionism is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of everyday interactions of individuals**.

The symbolic interactionism approach has its roots in the thinking of Max Weber, a German sociologist who emphasized the need to understand a setting from point of view of the people in it. George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer and George Homans are major followers of this approach.

According to symbolic interactionism, society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. That is, human beings live in a world of symbols, attaching meaning to virtually everything from the words on this page to the wink of an eye. “Reality” is simply how we define our surroundings, our obligations towards others and even our own identities.

Consider applying symbolic interactionism to the American institution of marriage. Symbols may include wedding bands, vows of life‐long commitment, a white bridal dress, a wedding cake, a Church ceremony, and flowers and music. American society attaches general meanings to these symbols, but individuals also maintain their own perceptions of what these and other symbols mean. For example, one of the spouses may see their circular wedding rings as symbolizing “never ending love,” while the other may see them as a mere financial expense. Much faulty communication can result from differences in the perception of the same events and symbols

**Critical Review:**

Critics claim that symbolic interactionism neglects the macro level of social interpretation—the “big picture.” In other words, symbolic interactionist may miss the larger issues of society by focusing too closely on the “trees” (for example, the size of the diamond in the wedding ring) rather than the “forest” (for example, the quality of the marriage). The perspective also receives criticism for slighting the influence of social forces and institutions on individual interactions.