

# SOCI 101

# Principles of Social Organizations

## Session 4 – Sociological Perspectives

Lecturer: Dr. Dan-Bright S. Dzorgbo, UG  
Contact Information: [ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh](mailto:ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh)



# UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

**School of Continuing and Distance Education**

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# Session Overview

## Introduction

This section examines three major “sociological perspectives” or theoretical frameworks . They are: (i) structural functionalism (or functionalism for short), (ii) Marxism and Conflict theory and (iii) symbolic interactionism.

## Goals and Objectives

By the end of the session you should be able to:

- know what constitutes “the sociological perspective”
- identify the three major perspectives found in sociology
- explain these perspectives with examples
- compare and contrast these perspectives
- apply them to understand aspects of society and human behavior

# Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One : Structural Functionalism (Functionalism)
- Topic Two : Conflict theory
- Topic Three: Symbolic Interactionism including dramaturgical approach

# Reading List

- Ballantine, J. and K. A. Roberts (2007) *Our Social World: Introduction to Sociology*, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.
- Berger P. L. (1963) *Invitation to Sociology*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Dzorgbo D-B. S. (2013) *Sociological Theory: Classical Ideas and their Application in the African Context*, Accra: Woeli Publishing Services
- Giddens, A. (2004) *Sociology: Introductory Readings*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Haralambos M. (1995) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, London: Collins Educational.
- Robertson, Ian (1987) *Sociology: The Basic Concepts*, New York: Worth Publishers.
- Schaefer R. (2004) *Sociology*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Turner, J. H. (2006) *Sociology* New Jersey: Pearson
  
- Robertson, Ian (1987) *Sociology: The Basic Concepts*, New York: Worth Publishers.

# What is sociological perspective?

- A perspective in everyday language could be defined as a way of looking at things, a view point and an approach. This is precisely how we want you to understand sociological perspectives. A sociological perspective is a sociological way of viewing social phenomena, social issues and human behaviour.
- Sociology offers multiple perspectives sometimes different or conflicting but other times complementing for viewing social phenomena, social issues and human behaviour.
- It is interesting to know that sociologists do not see things from only one perspective; indeed they sometimes disagree on how social phenomena, social issues and human behaviour should be perceived, interpreted and analyzed

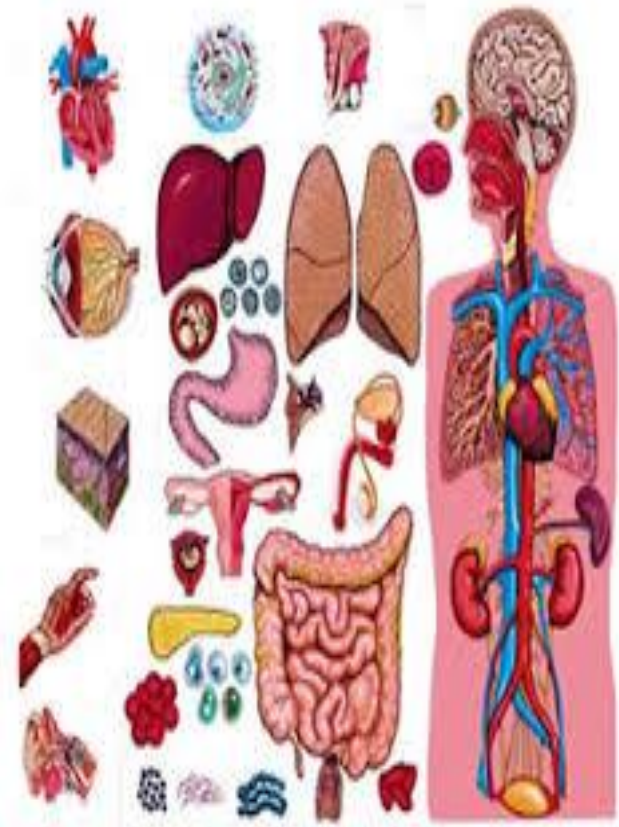
# Topic One:

## The Functionalist Perspective

- Structural Functionalism (or functionalism for short) is distinctively American sociological theory and is associated with the works of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton
- It builds on re-reading and synthesis of the works of Comte Spencer, Durkheim in the light of the twentieth century
- Comte's contribution: Society has structure
- Spencer's contribution: society is like a living organism (see next slide)
- Durkheim' contribution: social institutions such as religion has function for society

# Functionalism(cont'd)

- As we have already seen, Spencer compared societies to living organisms.
- Living organisms have structures- a set of interrelated parts such as the head, limbs, heart, etc
- Each part has a **function** or has a **consequence** for the survival of the whole system
- According to Spencer, society has a the structure with its interrelated parts being the family, religion, polity, health, and so on.
- It is through these structures that society maintains itself.



# Functionalism (cont'd)

- The functionalist perspective in sociology is an approach that views society as made up of structures or parts that are interdependent and performing functions for its survival.
- Functionalists' aim goal is to explain what holds society together and make them stable and orderly.
- They see society as a social structure or social system with various parts that “**function**” or have “**positive effects**” or “**consequences**” for the whole society
- When society is orderly, it is said to be in equilibrium but if there is conflict, tension or disturbances in society, the society is said to be experiencing disequilibrium.
- However, functionalists argue that society will re-adjust itself and comes back to a state of equilibrium
- Functionalists have a penchant for seeing any parts or activities in society as having function to perform for society; otherwise they would not exist in the first place: so most things are functional even deviance, criminality, conflict, poverty, etc. have some positive things about them



# Functionalism (cont'd)

- Functions that a part performs for the whole the can however be **manifest, latent, dysfunctional**
- **Manifest functions:** Is a function or consequence of a part that is obvious or intended. For example, the obvious reason for attending school train people to develop personalities and skills for participation in adult society.
- **Latent functions:** Is a function or consequence that is not intended, obvious and easily unrecognized. For example, going to school is also way of keeping or controlling the young ones from indulging in bad behaviours and from temptations so that their parents can have peace of mind and engage in their daily routines of productive work
- Or people attend church to worship their maker or acquire moral values (manifest function) but the unintended or unrecognized consequences are church attendance serves marriage market for most single adults; place to solidarise with others, or place where some pastors make a living, or where people display their wealth or latest clothes, or network for employment, etc.

# Functionalism (cont'd)

- On some other occasions, some parts or features of society can be **dysfunctional**. For example, the function of an industry could be to produce material goods for members of society, the dysfunctional aspect of the industry could be air or environmental pollution.
- We can apply functionalist perspective in interpreting the role of social institutions such as the family, politics, education, economy, health, and religion in society as a whole or for the individuals in society.
- If we ask you to write an essay about the importance of these institutions, you are likely to give us a functionalist interpretations

# Functionalism (cont'd)

## **Praises for functionalism:**

- It explains how societies manage to be stable and orderly.
- It helps to understand why social life is orderly and predictable

## **Criticisms against functionalism:**

- It explains society as always stable and orderly, which is not always the case.
- It is a conservative perspective and seems apologetic to the status quo or existing social conditions
- It neglects the usefulness and benefits of conflict and tensions to society. It rather treats them as dysfunctional for society

# Topic Two: Conflict Theory

- This perspective draws on the work of Karl Marx
- Conflict between owners of means of production and wage earners
- Struggle between social classes as the “engine” of historical change
- Conflict in society arises over competition for scarce resources and social change is an inevitable feature of society.
- Existing social arrangements means socio-economic political inequality among groups
- Who benefits? Who loses? Who suffers?
- Oil companies may extract oil to benefit the rich and develop world but pollute poor countries’ environment, the rich and powerful in society would punish severely petty theft but would not prosecute the big guys in society who are corrupt and steal huge monies from the state coffers; the politicians would say they want power to improve the conditions of the poor but they want to improve their personal conditions first

# Conflict Theory (cont'd)

Conflict theory also examines conflicts that do not necessary lead to open violence or revolution as Marx suggested.

Other conflicts recognized include:

Tension, hostility, competition and disagreement among groups over goals and values in society such as women versus men, employees versus employers, old versus young, rich versus poor those with power versus those without power, urban dwellers versus rural dwellers, in the US white versus Black, producers versus consumers, the developed world and the underdeveloped world, etc.

# Conflict perspective (cont'd)

## **Praises for conflict theory:**

- It highlights aspects of society that functionalism glosses over
- It shows that conflict is a reality of society which sociologists should also pay attention to

## **Criticism against conflict theory:**

- It focuses on conflict and competition and fails to appreciate that social life is orderly, stable and less controversial

# Topic Three:

## Symbolic Interactionism

- The perspective draws much of its inspiration from the work of Max Weber; his verstehen concept
- Symbolic Interactionism is a view of in sociology that focuses on how people in the context of interaction act towards, respond to and influence one another
- Much of human interaction takes place on face-to-face basis, with the use of spoken and written language (which contains words which have meanings and also symbolize things in the environment) but interaction also involves the use of signs, gestures, shared rules.
- Humans interpret all these symbols and construct meanings out of them and use these meanings as the basis for their subsequent actions

# Symbolic Interactionism (cont'd)

- Symbolic Interactionism is espoused by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blummer
- A symbol is anything that can meaningfully represent something else.
- The major difference between interactionism on the one hand and functionalism and conflict theory on the other is that, while latter is a macro theory because they focus on the larger structures of society such as the religion, family, politics and education, interactionism is a micro theory because its focuses on the individuals in the society and their interactions



# Interactionism (cont'd):

- Studies how people interact with one another in society
- Signs , gestures, shared rules, written and unspoken language are all symbols
- Individuals attach meaning to their own actions and to the actions of others; interaction between people takes place through the use of symbols.

# Interactionism (cont'd): The Dramaturgical Approach

- Under the interactionist perspective is the Dramaturgical Approach to studying human behaviour
- Espoused by Erving Goffman
- He saw society as a form of theatre where individuals in their interaction with others perform for them to make good impressions on others—impression management
- In the theatre, we have the **front** and **back stage**



# Interactionism (con'd)

## Dramaturgical Approach

**FRONT STAGE:** This is where the actions or performances take place in the theater and the actions and performances must be executed perfectly to make for a good impressions on the audience

**BACK STAGE:** This is where the preparation for the performances take place, where the rehearsals are done where the actors and actresses retire after performing. Here things can be done with mistakes, after all the audience cannot see.

- Individuals also have front stages and back stages. The front stage is when they are in the context of interaction so they must perform for their audience – hence individuals become performers and endeavour to make good impressions on others: through the manipulation of tone of voice, dresses, hair style, make ups, etc. Hence social interaction becomes drama—the dramaturgical approach to understand everyday life and human interaction
- Other examples: Individuals have front stages and back stages; the front stage of a restaurant is where customers sit to eat and so must be clean; the back stage is the kitchen where the various dishes are prepared, often filthy and hidden from the customers; the living and lavatories of the home are front stages, while bedrooms are back stages

# Interactionism (Contd)

## Symbolic Interactionism

### **Praises for Interactionism:**

- Sociologists using this perspective focuses on the specific, detailed aspects of personal everyday life
- The interactionist perspective provides an insight into the mechanics of everyday life
- It also have the advantage of revealing fundamental social processes that other perspectives easily overlook

### **Criticisms against Interactionism:**

- Ignores the influence of the larger social structures on human behaviour

# Conclusion: Comparing Functionalism, Conflict Theory and Interactionism

## Levels of Analysis

- Functionalists and conflict theorists— examine large-scale social structures (family, education, politics religion, etc.) and patterns in society. For example functionalism will examine how changes in family structure lead to teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, school drop out, homelessness, etc. Or conflict theory will examine how conflict or upheaval in the political system lead to unemployment for the individual . These are all macro-level analyses because they examine large-scale social structures so functionalism and conflict theories are macro theories
- Symbolic interactionists on the other hand examine small scale patterns and interactions in society. They would examine how everyday interactions and symbolic communications and meanings in generated in the local communities lead teenagers to be pregnant, delinquent, school drop-outs, or homeless. These are micro-level analysis so symbolic interactionism is a micro theory