

Three Sociological Perspectives

	Functionalist	Conflict	Interactionist
View of society	Stable, well integrated	Characterized by tension and struggle between groups	Active in influencing and affecting everyday social interaction
Level of analysis emphasized	Macro	Macro	Micro, as a way of understanding the larger macro phenomena
Key concepts	Social integration Institutions Anomie	Inequality Capitalism Stratification	Symbols Nonverbal communication Face-to-face interaction
View of the individual	People are socialized to perform societal functions	People are shaped by power, coercion, and authority	People manipulate symbols and create their social worlds through interaction
View of the social order	Maintained through cooperation and consensus	Maintained through force and coercion	Maintained by shared understanding of everyday behavior
View of social change	Predictable, reinforcing	Change takes place all the time and may have positive consequences	Reflected in people's social positions and their communications with others
Example	Public punishments reinforce the social order	Laws enforce the positions of those in power	People respect laws or disobey them based on their own past experience
Proponents	Émile Durkheim Talcott Parsons Robert Merton	Karl Marx W. E. B. Du Bois Ida Wells-Barnett	George Herbert Mead Charles Horton Cooley Erving Goffman

society that appear dysfunctional, seemingly contributing to a decrease in social order or integration, will either wither away over time or contribute some hidden benefits that researchers seek to reveal. Durkheim's research into social order and its challenges, especially within modern societies, is a classic example of the functionalist perspective. Durkheim assumed that, over time, society would progress toward greater order as it came to terms with apparent threats or challenges.

Whereas the functionalist perspective emphasizes consensus and cooperation, the **conflict perspective** focuses on power and the allocation of valued resources in society. According to conflict theorists, social order cannot be fully understood apart from an analysis of how the status quo is established and maintained by those who control key resources. Such resources include material resources (such as money, land, and property), social resources (such as family connections, social networks, and prestige), and

cultural resources (such as education, beliefs, knowledge, and taste). The existing social structure helps maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in inferior positions. Marx's work on inequality, social class, and alienation provides a classic example of the conflict perspective.

Finally, whereas functionalist and conflict theorists both analyze large-scale, society-wide patterns of behavior, theorists who take the **interactionist perspective** generalize about everyday forms of social interaction in order to explain society as a whole. For interactionists, society is the product of our everyday interactions (with parents, friends, teachers, or strangers) through which we establish shared meanings and thus construct order. Because society is dependent on this ongoing construction, society is fluid and subject to change. Goffman's dramaturgical approach is an example of the interactionist perspective.

The three-perspectives model has the advantage of providing us with conceptual hooks that allow us to recall some of the key concerns and issues sociologists have raised. A disadvantage, however, is that it gives the illusion that these three are discrete categories with fundamentally different and incompatible ways of looking at

conflict perspective

A sociological approach that assumes social behavior is best understood in terms of tension between groups over power or the allocation of resources, including housing, money, access to services, and political representation.

interactionist perspective

A sociological approach that generalizes about everyday forms of social interaction in order to explain society as a whole.

SOC THINK

To what extent was your decision to go to college driven by a desire to fit in and contribute to society? How might access to resources have shaped your decisions about going to college? What specific individuals influenced your decision and how did they do so?