

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
EDU453

KEYNOTE OFFPRINTS
SERIES 02

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*** SOCIOLOGICAL *THEORIES OF SOCIETY* ***

Within the discipline of Sociology, **three** main theories inform the work of Sociologists in all areas of specialisation, they are:

- (1) **EVOLUTIONARY**
- (2) **FUNCTIONALISM**
- (3) **CONFLICT PERSPECTIVES** (e.g. Marxism, Weberism)
- (4) **SOCIAL INTERACTIONISM.**

Based on your current knowledge of Sociology, can you please try to answer the following questions below with a partner:-

- a. Can you quote the name of a few Sociologists, in relation to each of the theory above?
- b. Can you please write down at least 3 main features of each theory, in your own words.
- c. Now, could you please write down 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses of each theories in your own words.
- d. In your own opinion, which of the four theories best describes and explains 'society'?

More recently within Sociology as an academic discipline, there has been a move towards unifying the different theories in order to better explain 'society' and 'social life'.

However, this move creates a problem especially for students like you who need to know specifically about sociological theories as applied to research settings.

This means you need to read between the lines to understand!

EVOLUTIONARY

Sociologists:

Auguste Comte (French) and Herbert Spencer (British).

How do they view society?

- a. Evolutionary theory owes much to **the work of Charles Darwin** who relates social life to natural life. **Is it possible that natural life is very similar to social life?**
- b. Evolutionists believe that **society will grow and become more complex like a living organism**. Social actors are also seen as organisms that need each other to survive and grow.
- c. **'Natural selection'** means that weaker societies will be destroyed because they are weak and unable to adapt to the natural environment. Evolutionists like Spencer, also believe that weaker societies should not be helped based on the natural process of evolution. **Do you agree with Spencer?**
- d. Based on **Darwin's 'Survival of the Fittest'** theory, people within society who cannot adapt and strive should also not be helped. This is because if s/he wants something, s/he should work for it. **Can you imagine what society would be like?**
- e. Evolutionary theory also focuses **on social effects that will bring forward social changes**. Evolutionist are interested in social changes because they hope to compare and contrast different societies and predict the pattern of society in the future. **Could you safely predict how Malaysian society would be like, say 20 years from today's date?**

FUNCTIONALISM

Sociologists:

Emile Durkheim (French) and Talcott Parsons (American).

How do they view society?

- a. **Functionalism is akin to Biology.** The various parts of society are seen as interrelated and from a complete system. So, functionalists will study the school system for example, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the 'social system'. **What other 'parts of society' could be studied?**
- b. They see **behaviour within society as structured** and social life as a pattern that is repeated and reinforced. Life is organised through social rules and the Law, and other 'structures'.
- c. Each institution and social entity within **society performs a function within the social system.** For example, the function of Education is... (cf. Adnan and Smith, 2001).
- d. Human societies have **functional prerequisites** that must be met if they are to survive. A system of socialising and educating younger members of society, could be seen as a functional prerequisite. **Can you guess why?**
- e. Because functionalists view society as a system of parts. They believe that there is also a degree of integration between the different parts or **value consensus**, an agreement about values by society's members. For example, the Educational system helps to produce skills and increase economic production. **Is reality as simple and unproblematic as that?**
- f. Functionalism assumes that **order and stability is essential for the survival of social systems.** The theory wants to explain the origin and maintenance of order and stability in society through shared values. **What values might our Malaysian society share?**

CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE – MARXISM

Sociologist:

Karl Marx (of course) 😊

How do they view society?

- a. Marxism believes that **in order to survive, we must produce food and material objects**, in doing so we develop social relationships. Production also involves science, technology and raw materials or ‘forces of production’.
- b. The ‘forces of production’ and the ‘social relationships of production’ form the economic base (**infrastructure**), which influence other aspects of society like political and educational institutions (**superstructure**).
- c. Nevertheless, **all societies contain basic ‘contradictions’ where one group will exploit the other**, for example those who have access to ‘means of production’ compared to just mere workers. *Can you explain this in your own words please?*
- d. Marxists see **wealth as being controlled by the capitalists who own means of production, and employing cheap labour**. This exploitation continues as capitalists are private individuals and they oppress workers. Marx believes that this will lead to the downfall of capitalism. *Do you agree with Marx?*
- e. Marx sees ‘**communism**’ as the new world order where collective production remains but without individual capitalists who oppress and exploit the working classes. *Could this ever happen?*
- f. The relationship between wage labourers and capitalists is seen as ‘**an equal exchange**’. Marxists disagree and refer to this as ‘**ruling class ideology**’ that blinds the working class to the exploitation and conflicts of capitalism. Hence, a sense of ‘false consciousness’ is shared and reinforced. *Could this be an overly-bleak view of society? Don't we have power over our own destiny?*

INTERACTIONISM

Sociologist:

No 'big' names, but we have people like Cooley who described the 'looking glass self' of social actors.

How do they view society?

- a. **Interactionism focuses on small-scale interactions** and is against the notions of 'societies' and 'social systems'. The theory also rejects the idea that as members of society, our actions are a direct response towards social systems.

Functionalism and conflict theories (Marxism, for example); **(1)** offer a general view of society ('macro-theories'), **(2)** regard society as a system ('system theories'); and **(3)** see human behaviour as shaped by 'systems'. Functionalism sees behaviour as directed by values and norms of the social system, and Marxism sees it as being influenced by economic structures.

- b. **'Meaning' and 'Interpretation' is central** in interactionism. Any action is meaningful to those involved, but they are not fixed – SO, interactionists study how meanings are created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interaction. *Can you imagine how this idea could be applied to real life? The classroom, for example?*
- c. Interactionists are also **interested in 'self concepts'**. They study the 'mental pictures' social actors have on themselves and how self concepts influence human actions. We also tend to react differently in the eyes of different people. **Do you agree with this?**
- d. The **'construction of meaning'** is the key to understanding the world. Individuals are 'certain kinds of people' (preconceptions) so, social life entails the negotiation of these preconceptions by going against or reinforcing them! **The roles of social actors are then studied and described** within a given niche.

Sociology of Education

(The description of the field of Sociology of Education below is written by Prof. Aaron Pallas, the editor of the international refereed journal, Sociology of Education, with some additions from the Course Tutor)

The sociology of education has been an important part of the development of the discipline of sociology, with its origins in the ideas of Emile Durkheim, who was a professor of sociology and education at the Sorbonne at the turn of the 20th century. Sociologists of education study the myriad connections between education and society at all levels of the education system, including primary, secondary, and postsecondary. Some scholars have emphasized the extent to which schools, colleges and universities are socializing institutions, whereas others attend to the ways in which these institutions influence social stratification, social mobility, and adult socioeconomic success, and examine the within-school and between-school stratification processes that account for education's observed effects. Still others view the relationship between education and society in macro perspective, analyzing how curricula create and legitimate the modern nation-state, or understanding the supply of and demand for education in terms of social movements, social control and patterns of social change.

The work of sociologists of education is both comparative, examining education in the U.S. and abroad, and historical, studying current patterns and those of bygone eras. Members of the section draw on diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives in their work. The diversity of approaches makes for spirited debate, and maintains the sociology of education as one of the liveliest subfields of the discipline of sociology.

The sociology of education has a particular affinity to other subfields in sociology, including the sociology of the family, social stratification and mobility, the sociology of organizations and occupations, political sociology, and the sociology of age and human lifespan.

Because education is a public good, sociologists of education have a great deal to say about educational policy and practice, applying the knowledge the field has produced to a broad array of educational and social problems. Among these are unequal access to education, what makes schools effective, dropping out and persisting in school at various levels, teachers' professional development and collaborative work, ability grouping and tracking in elementary and secondary schools, school restructuring, and the school-to-work transition, to name but a few.

2001, NYU