

Macro Theory paper

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### History

Both functionalism and conflict theorists maintain a macro focus on communities and total society however, the two take a different stand on social stratification and inequality within the communities. The conflict theory emphasizes on how groups in communities and society are in constant conflict and in a power struggle for scarce resources and stresses the inequalities of social groups. Conflict theory also embraces the thought that individual participants in a society function to maximize their own benefits and is often used to describe conflict between social classes in society (Kirst-Ashman, 2011). Functionalism emphasizes that a community's purpose of function and how the community works to continue functioning. It seeks to explain the features of a society in terms of the functions they perform or the consequences they have for society as a whole. Functionalism focus on a community's function and believes that society is composed of a number of parts with each part contributing to the society. Functionalism believes differentiation is essential for a cohesive society.

The conflict theory was coined by Karl Marx when he noticed a trend in history between the "haves" and "have not's" in which there was a constant conflict between the two and suggested that all societies go through stages of economic development. As societies evolve individuals are more concerned with making a profit, than in meeting their survival needs. Prior to the American Civil War Marx wrote extensively about the concept of class however, the conflict theory did not resurface in America until the 1950's through two German sociologist: Lewis Coser and Ralph Dahrendorf ( Graaff, 2006).

Functionalism is the oldest and most dominant, theoretical perspective in the social sciences and was founded in the late <sup>nineteenth</sup> century by Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim but did not become a school of thought in anthropology until the twentieth century. Functionalism became dominant in America theory in the 1950s and 1960s but due to criticism it declined in the early 1970s. Functionalism compared society to a human body with interacting parts all working toward a common goal of keeping the body functioning properly (Kirst-Ashman, 2011).

### **Concepts**

The conflict theory is based on the assumption that society is characterized by conflict and discrimination in which certain groups of individuals are privileged and others are disadvantaged through the unjust use of political, economic, or social power (Changhwan, & Sakamoto, 2006). Four concepts are vital dimensions of the conflict theory and include conflict, power, minority, and change. According to Sekulić (2010), “conflict is a clash or struggle between opposing forces or classes. Power is the ability to control and influence collective decisions and actions. Minority refers to groups that have limited access to power even when they represent a numerical majority. Change is a transition or transformation from one condition or state to another”. Society is viewed as being composed of various competing groups that are in constant conflict with each other over power and resources. Some groups such as minority groups have less access to power, which means they must struggle to get it. The elite class includes the individuals that own or run companies or individuals that we consider “rich”. Most politicians that we elect into office are usually part of this class.

Functionalism emphasizes that all social systems share certain functional prerequisites which must be met if the system is to survive and operate efficiently and one way of doing this is by role allocation and performance (Kirst-Ashman, 2011). Lehning, Vu, & Pintak describe

social stratification as a system which attaches unequal rewards and privileges in society and is a mechanism for insuring that these roles are allocated and performed by the best possible candidates which will optimize community function.

Functionalism also believes that there are both positive and negative functions within a society which contribute to it functioning properly. Both positive and negative functions can have manifest and latent consequences. Manifest consequences are the intended, recognized, and expected consequences while latent consequences are the unintended, unrecognized, unanticipated, or unpredicted consequences (Graaff, 2006). Functionalists also believe that social problems arise when a part of the society becomes disorganized and this social disorganization causes a collapse of the social structure, and all the working parts of society do not work together in harmony.

### **The Issue of Poverty**

According to Lehning, Vu, & Pintak (2007), functionalism views that “poverty exists because differentiation is essential for a cohesive society. If poverty did not make a contribution, it would cease to exist”. Functionalism explains that poverty actually performs many functions such as having the poor do the unskilled, dangerous, dead-end, and undignified work of society at low pay. Upper class individuals contract out such work as, yard work, and child care and poor individuals purchase goods and services that would otherwise go unused ( Moeller, 2008). Low income people are also more inclined to volunteer for medical drug test which benefit society and all those in it. It does recognize that poverty may be dysfunctional and unpleasant for those that live it and the community in which they are apart of however it does benefit some parts of society such as social service agencies, religious organizations, and community groups that would cease to exist without it. The poor also highlight problems within the community,

such as the lack of a livable wage and affordable wage. Functionalists believe that poverty is necessary to social order, as the poor are forced to work together for a common gain.

Functionalism holds that everyone and everything in society, no matter how strange it may seem, serves a purpose (Changhwan, & Sakamoto, 2006).

The conflict theory has a different view and considers how society is affected by discrimination and unjust use of resources. In this view society is broken down into the “haves” and “have not” and this is only beneficial to the haves who run the companies and control production in society. Poor individuals are denied access to resources within the community such as schools, more taxes, higher prices on items, and healthcare.

According to Changhwan, & Sakamoto, (2006), “most good jobs now require a college education, but the poor cannot afford to send their children to college. Scholarships are available, but only to the best performing students. Poor students usually tend to score lower on assessment tests because of lower expectations of teachers and administrators”.

The poor are not generally offered the kinds of financial services which are provided to people in the “haves” category. Bank loans that poor individuals receive usually have higher interest rates due to the possibility of defaulting on the loans while the rich or upper class usually receive low interest rates and usually don’t need the loans as much as the lower class. When poor people pay taxes on items they purchase, they pay a much greater amount of their resources on these items (Lehning, Vu, & Pintak, 2007). This was a huge topic in the republican primaries and the issue that businessman Herman Cain used when implementing his 999 deal and shot him up the polls. In this deal all individuals, business, and all sales taxes would be a flat 9 percent which many of his supporters believe would be better for the lower class individual.

Individuals in poverty are also prone to get sick more often and stay sick longer than people in the upper class due to not being able to afford medicine, improper diets, and they usually cannot get proper medical care when they get sick. This in turn can affect their life expectancy. People who live in poverty are subject to more infant deaths and disease and rates of mental illness also go up as they are less likely to receive treatment (Sekulić, 2010). People who live in poverty are taught that they should strive to rise above it, but are not afforded the means to do so.

Nearly 1 in 6 children in the United States live in poverty with 30% of them being African American children. The Hispanic population accounts for another 29% and Asian American children making up 12% (Roth, 2011) With these numbers is clear to see that individuals of different races and ethnicity are often times barred from opportunities offered to others in society. In this theory the “haves” are in control of what laws are passed in order to help benefit their well-being, often times forcing the legal system against people of race. While people in poverty do commit crimes they usually tend to serve more time in jail for crimes such as drugs and theft than do white collar criminals who commit fraud, inside trading and embezzlement. People of lower class and people of different races are often times discriminated against because of the difference in power between classes.

The conflict theory believes that wealthy people become dominant and tend to make or regulate the laws or regulations that govern our society. People who live in poverty tend to live in less desirable neighborhoods where crime is more prevalent. Law enforcement agencies also tend to concentrate on these areas more and arrest these individuals more often for crimes in which wealthy people would not be arrested for. The children usually go to schools that are not as good as private schools and cannot afford the items they need to help them prosper in their

education. Usually these families are single parent families where the parent must work jobs that keep them from being home to help children with school work also resulting in a decline in grades for the child.

### **Personal Position**

My personal option is somewhat skewed in that I believe that maybe both the conflict theory and functionalism may both be right to some degree. Functionalism states that society needs class differentiation as lower class people play important roles in a society. I do believe that without poverty we would have many social workers and social agencies out of work and shut down. There would be no need for homeless shelters and those that work in them would lose their jobs. Churches which reach out to these people in times of need would also be affected to some degree. Many police officers would also lose their jobs as people would be less apt to commit small crimes such as shoplifting or other crimes which are used as means in which to support families. Young individuals that often face a lack of opportunities often turn to the military as a career or as a means of paying for college later due to skyrocketing college tuition costs. So without them, our military would slowly dwindle and would not be capable of performing the functions it's intended to.

The conflict theory also makes sense in that I agree that it is usually a small percentage of individuals that make laws and control companies. I agree with the conflict theory that lower class individuals or people in poverty lack access to resources which are afforded to the upper class even though the lower class provides the back breaking work that makes it possible for our society to survive. People in the lower class are often not afforded the same life chances as those with money and their children will usually seek out other children that act, speak, and have the same cultural values as themselves and usually meet these people in their schools or social

functions which are generally attended by others of their same class. They are not afforded the same educational opportunities as those that attend private schools that have new computers and better sporting equipment which helps them excel later in life. Although there has always been rich people and poor people, recent issues have forced the topic into the forefront of everyday conversation. The recent bail outs have caused great anger among those in the working class as it became evident that people in power made the rules. Banks foreclosed on homes on common individuals however when the bank failed to meet their payments they were given the common man's tax dollars so they would not fail. Car companies were given tax money and wrote off millions in debt they owed small business in order to survive but still gave bonus to the individuals at the top of the company.

As I was reading the newspaper the other day the headline read "*More than 49 million Americans-even more than thought-live in poverty, new measure finds*" (Roth, 2011). The income inequality within the U.S. has been an important issue in recent years and is one of the main issues shaping the 2012 elections. The conflict theory states that often time's conflict will lead to physical resistance and we are now starting to see that, not just here but all over the world.

Within the last year we have seen several countries throughout the world protest their living conditions and even some taking to arms against their governments. Governments have been overthrown and leaders killed all in the name of inequality. Our own government even supports these protesters and advised the foreign governments they need to let these individuals have a voice in their government. We have even used military force to help overthrow these leaders and their ideals, while here at home we have similar problems.



The Occupy Wall Street movement has made inequality a key focus of its protest and focuses many of its beliefs on the conflict theory's ideals and even holding signs that state they are the 99%. This is in reference to the conflict theory in which it is believed that most of the wealth and power in society is held by 1% of the population while the other 99% are the common workers. The conflict theory believes that law enforcement and the military are tools in which to keep the lower class enslaved and to enforce their views and this has become ever so clear in recent weeks. Our own government and law enforcement agencies are treating our protesters just like the foreign leaders were when our government intervened. These issues only solidify the concept of the conflict theory. The occupy movement has spread across the country and has helped to put the inequality issue into the media and political spotlight and has caused many to look to the conflict theory for guidance. The Greek philosopher Plato stated it best, "Poverty is the mother of crime, and revolution". –Plato (Roth, 2011).

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