C H A P T E R 7

Structural Functionalism, Neofunctionalism, and Conflict Theory

Chapter Outline

Structural Functionalism

Neofunctionalism

Conflict Theory

Structural functionalism, especially in the work of Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, and their students and followers, was for many years *the* dominant sociological theory. However, in the last three decades it has declined dramatically in importance (Chriss, 1995) and, in at least some senses, has receded into the recent history of sociological theory. This decline is reflected in Colomy's (1990a) description of structural functionalism as a theoretical "tradition." Structural functionalism is now mainly of historical significance, although it is also notable for the role it played in the emergence of neofunctionalism in the 1980s (Nielsen, 2007b). After offering an overview of structural functionalism, we will discuss neofunctionalism as a possible successor to it as well as an example of the recent movement toward synthesis within sociological theory (Abrahamson, 2001). However, the future of neofunctionalism itself has been cast into doubt by the fact that its founder, Jeffrey Alexander (personal communication, October 17, 1994), has arrived at the conclusion that neofunctionalism "is no longer satisfactory to me." He states, "I am now separating myself from the movement I started."

For many years, the major alternative to structural functionalism was conflict theory. We will discuss Ralf Dahrendorf's traditional version of conflict theory, as well as a more recent integrative and synthetic effort by Randall Collins.

Before turning to the specifics of structural functionalism and conflict theory, we need, following Thomas Bernard (1983), to place these theories in the broader context of the debate between consensus theories (one of which is structural functionalism) and conflict theories (one of which is the sociological conflict theory that will be discussed in this chapter). *Consensus theories* see shared norms and values as fundamental to society, focus on social order based on tacit agreements, and view social change as occurring in a slow and orderly fashion. In contrast, *conflict theories* emphasize the dominance of some social groups by others, see social order as based on manipulation

and control by dominant groups, and view social change as occurring rapidly and in a disorderly fashion as subordinate groups overthrow dominant groups.

Although these criteria broadly define the essential differences between the sociological theories of structural functionalism and conflict theory, Bernard's view is that the disagreement is far broader and has "been a recurring debate that has taken a variety of different forms throughout the history of Western thought" (1983:6). Bernard traced the debate back to ancient Greece (and the differences between Plato [consensus] and Aristotle [conflict]) and through the history of philosophy. Later, in sociology, the debate was joined by (the conflict theorist is listed first) Marx and Comte, Simmel and Durkheim, and Dahrendorf and Parsons. We already have examined briefly the ideas of the first two pairs of sociologists (although, as we have seen, their work is far broader than is implied by the label "conflict" or "consensus" theorist); in this chapter we examine Dahrendorf's conflict theory and Parsons's consensus theory, among others.

Although I emphasize the differences between structural functionalism and conflict theory, we should not forget that they have important similarities. In fact, Bernard argues that "the areas of agreement among them are more extensive than the areas of disagreement" (1983:214). For example, they are both macro-level theories focally concerned with large-scale social structures and social institutions. As a result, in my (1980) terms, both theories exist within the same sociological ("social facts") paradigm (see the Appendix).

Structural Functionalism

Robert Nisbet argued that structural functionalism was "without any doubt, the single most significant body of theory in the social sciences in the present [twentieth] century" (cited in J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979:xi). Kingsley Davis (1959) took the position that structural functionalism was, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with sociology. Alvin Gouldner (1970) implicitly took a similar position when he attacked Western sociology largely through a critical analysis of the structural-functional theories of Talcott Parsons.

Despite its undoubted hegemony in the two decades after World War II, structural functionalism has declined in importance as a sociological theory. Even Wilbert Moore, a man who was intimately associated with this theory, argued that it had "become an embarrassment in contemporary theoretical sociology" (1978:321). Two observers even stated: "Thus, functionalism as an explanatory theory is, we feel, 'dead' and continued efforts to use functionalism as a theoretical explanation should be abandoned in favor of more promising theoretical perspectives" (J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979:141).[1] Nicholas Demerath and Richard Peterson (1967) took a more positive view, arguing that structural functionalism is not a passing fad. However, they admitted that it is likely to evolve into another sociological theory, just as this theory itself evolved out of the earlier organicism. The rise of neofunctionalism (which we discuss later in this chapter) seems to support Demerath and Peterson's position rather than the more negative perspective of Turner and Maryanski.

[1] Despite this statement, Jonathan Turner and Alexandra Maryanski (1979) are willing to argue that functionalism can continue to be useful as a method.

In structural functionalism, the terms *structural* and *functional* need not be used in conjunction, although they typically are conjoined. We could study the structures of society without being concerned with their functions (or consequences) for other structures. Similarly, we could examine the functions of a variety of social processes that may not take a structural form. Still, the concern for both elements characterizes structural functionalism. Although structural functionalism takes various forms (Abrahamson, 1978), *societal functionalism* is the dominant approach among sociological structural functionalists (Sztompka, 1974) and as such will be the focus of this chapter. The primary concern of societal functionalism is the large-scale social structures and institutions of society, their interrelationships, and their constraining effects on actors.

The Functional Theory of Stratification and Its Critics

The functional theory of stratification as articulated by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) is perhaps the best-known single piece of work in structural-functional theory. Davis and Moore made it clear that they regarded social stratification as both universal and necessary. They argued that no society is ever unstratified, or totally classless. Stratification is, in their view, a *functional* necessity. All societies need such a system, and this need brings into existence a system of stratification.[2] They also viewed a stratification system as a structure, pointing out that stratification refers not to the individuals in the stratification system but rather to a system of positions. They focused on how certain positions come to carry with them different degrees of prestige, not on how individuals come to occupy certain positions.

Given this focus, the major functional issue is how a society motivates and places people in their "proper" positions in the stratification system. This is reducible to two problems. First, how does a society instill in the "proper" individuals the desire to fill certain positions? Second, once people are in the right positions, how does society then instill in them the desire to fulfill the requirements of those positions?

Proper social placement in society is a problem for three basic reasons. First, some positions are more pleasant to occupy than others. Second, some positions are more important to the survival of society than others. Third, different social positions require different abilities and talents.

Although these issues apply to all social positions, Davis and Moore were concerned with the functionally more important positions in society. The positions that rank high within the stratification system are presumed to be those that are *less* pleasant to occupy but *more* important to the survival of society and that require the greatest ability and talent. In addition, society must attach sufficient rewards to these positions so that enough people will seek to occupy them and the individuals who do come to occupy them will work diligently. The converse was implied by Davis and Moore but was not discussed. That is, low-ranking positions in the stratification system are presumed to be *more* pleasant and *less* important and to require less ability

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[2] This is an example of a teleological argument. We will have occasion to discuss this issue later in the chapter, but for now we can define a *teleological argument* as one that sees the social world as having purposes, or goals, that bring needed structures or events into being. In this case society "needs" stratification, and so it brings such a system into existence.

and talent. Also, society has less need to be sure that individuals occupy these positions and perform their duties with diligence.

Davis and Moore did not argue that a society consciously develops a stratification system in order to be sure that the high-level positions are filled, and filled adequately. Rather, they made it clear that stratification is an "unconsciously evolved device." However, it is a device that every society does, and *must,* develop if it is to survive.

To be sure that people occupy the higher-ranking positions, society must, in Davis and Moore's view, provide these individuals with various rewards, including great prestige, a high salary, and sufficient leisure. For example, to ensure enough doctors for our society, we need to offer them these and other rewards. Davis and Moore implied that we could not expect people to undertake the "burdensome" and "expensive" process of medical education if we did not offer such rewards. The implication seems to be that people at the top must receive the rewards that they do. If they did not, those positions would remain understaffed or unfilled and society would crumble.

The structural-functional theory of stratification has been subject to much criticism since its publication in 1945 (see Tumin, 1953, for the first important criticism; Huaco, 1966, for a good summary of the main criticisms to that date; and P. McLaughlin, 2001, for a philosophical overview).

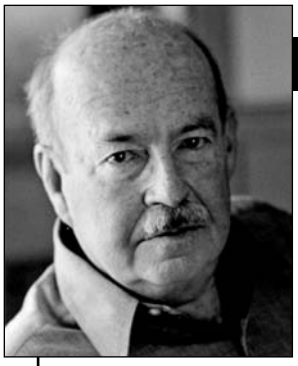
One basic criticism is that the functional theory of stratification simply perpetuates the privileged position of those people who already have power, prestige, and money. It does this by arguing that such people deserve their rewards; indeed, they need to be offered such rewards for the good of society.

The functional theory also can be criticized for assuming that simply because a stratified social structure existed in the past, it must continue to exist in the future. It is possible that future societies will be organized in other, nonstratified ways.

In addition, it has been argued that the idea of functional positions varying in their importance to society is difficult to support. Are garbage collectors really any less important to the survival of society than advertising executives? Despite the lower pay and prestige of the garbage collectors, they actually may be *more* important to the survival of the society. Even in cases where it could be said that one position serves a more important function for society, the greater rewards do not necessarily accrue to the more important position. Nurses may be much more important to society than movie stars are, but nurses have far less power, prestige, and income than movie stars have.

Is there really a scarcity of people capable of filling high-level positions? In fact, many people are prevented from obtaining the training they need to achieve prestigious positions even though they have the ability. In the medical profession, for example, there is a persistent effort to limit the number of practicing doctors. In general, many able people never get a chance to show that they can handle high-ranking positions even though there is a clear need for them and their contributions. Those in high-ranking positions have a vested interest in keeping their own numbers small and their power and income high.

Finally, it can be argued that we do not have to offer people power, prestige, and income to get them to want to occupy high-level positions. People can be equally motivated by the satisfaction of doing a job well or by the opportunity to be of service to others.



TALCOTT PARSONS

A Biographical Sketch

Talcott Parsons was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He came from a religious and intellectual background; his father was a Congregational minister, a professor, and ultimately the president of a small college. Parsons got an undergraduate degree from Amherst College in 1924 and set out to do graduate work at the London School of Economics. In the next year, he moved on to Heidelberg, Germany. Max Weber had spent a large portion of his career at Heidelberg, and although he had died five years before Parsons arrived, Weber's influence survived and his widow continued to hold meetings in her home, meetings that Parsons attended. Parsons was greatly affected by Weber's work and ultimately wrote his doctoral thesis at Heidelberg, dealing, in part, with Weber's work (Lidz, 2007).

Parsons became an instructor at Harvard in 1927, and although he switched departments several times, Parsons remained at Harvard until his death in 1979. His career progress was not rapid; he did not obtain a tenured position until 1939. Two years previously, he had published *The Structure of Social Action,* a book that not only introduced major sociological theorists such as Weber to large numbers of sociologists but also laid the groundwork for Parsons's own developing theory.

After that, Parsons made rapid academic progress. He was made chairman of the Harvard sociology department in 1944 and two years later set up and chaired the innovative department of social relations, which included not only sociologists but a variety of other social scientists. By 1949 he had been elected president of the American Sociological Association. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, with the publication of such books as *The Social System* (1951), Parsons became the dominant figure in American sociology.

However, in the late 1960s, Parsons came under attack from the emerging radical wing of American sociology. Parsons was seen as a political conservative, and his theory was considered highly conservative and little more than an elaborate categorization scheme. But in the 1980s, there was a resurgence in interest in Parsonsian theory not only in the United States but around the world (Alexander, 1982–1983; Buxton, 1985; Camic, 1990; Holton and Turner, 1986; Sciulli and Gerstein, 1985). Holton and Turner have perhaps gone the farthest, arguing that "Parsons' work . . . represents a more powerful contribution to sociological theory

Talcott Parsons's Structural Functionalism

Over the course of his life, Talcott Parsons did a great deal of theoretical work (Holmwood, 1996; Lidz, 2000; Münch, 2005). There are important differences between his early work and his later work. In this section we deal with his later, structural-functional theorizing. We begin this discussion of Parsons's structural functionalism with the four functional imperatives for all "action" systems, his famous AGIL scheme.

than that of Marx, Weber, Durkheim or any of their contemporary followers" (1986:13). Furthermore, Parsons's ideas influenced not only conservative thinkers but neo-Marxian theorists as well, especially Jurgen Habermas.

Upon Parsons's death, a number of his former students, themselves sociologists of considerable note, reflected on his theory, as well as on the man behind the theory (for a more recent, and highly personal, reminiscence, see Fox, 1997). In their musings, these sociologists offered some interesting insights into Parsons and his work. The few glimpses of Parsons reproduced here do not add up to a coherent picture, but they offer some provocative glimpses of the man and his work.

Robert Merton was one of his students when Parsons was just beginning his teaching career at Harvard. Merton, who became a noted theorist in his own right, makes it clear that graduate students came to Harvard in those years to study not with Parsons but rather with Pitirim Sorokin, the senior member of the department, who was to become Parsons's archenemy (Zafirovski, 2001):

> Of the very first generation of graduate students coming to Harvard . . . precisely none came to study with Talcott. They could scarcely have done so for the simplest of reasons: in 1931, he had no public identity whatever as a sociologist.
>
> Although we students came to study with the renowned Sorokin, a subset of us stayed to work with the unknown Parsons.
>
> (Merton, 1980:69)

Merton's reflections on Parsons's first course in theory are interesting too, especially because the material provided the basis for one of the most influential theory books in the history of sociology:

> Long before Talcott Parsons became one of the Grand Old Men of world sociology, he was for an early few of us its Grand Young Man. This began with his first course in theory. . . . [It] would provide him with the core of his masterwork, *The Structure of Social Action* which . . . did not appear in print until five years after its first oral publication.
>
> (Merton, 1980:69–70)

Although all would not share Merton's positive evaluation of Parsons, they would acknowledge the following:

> The death of Talcott Parsons marks the end of an era in sociology. When [a new era] does begin . . . it will surely be fortified by the great tradition of sociological thought which he has left to us.
>
> (Merton, 1980:71)

After this discussion of the four functions, we will turn to an analysis of Parsons's ideas on structures and systems.

AGIL

A *function* is "a complex of activities directed towards meeting a need or needs of the system" (Rocher, 1975:40; R. Stryker, 2007). Using this definition, Parsons

believes that there are four functional imperatives that are necessary for (characteristic of) all systems—adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I), and latency (L), or pattern maintenance. Together, these four functional imperatives are known as the AGIL scheme. In order to survive, a system must perform these four functions:

1. *Adaptation:* A system must cope with external situational exigencies. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs.
2. *Goal attainment:* A system must define and achieve its primary goals.
3. *Integration:* A system must regulate the interrelationship of its component parts. It also must manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives (A, G, L).
4. *Latency (pattern maintenance):* A system must furnish, maintain, and renew both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation.

Parsons designed the AGIL scheme to be used at *all* levels in his theoretical system (for one example, see Paulsen and Feldman, 1995). In the discussion below on the four action systems, we will illustrate how Parsons uses AGIL.

The *behavioral organism* is the action system that handles the adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external world. The *personality system* performs the goal-attainment function by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them. The *social system* copes with the integration function by controlling its component parts. Finally, the *cultural system* performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action. Figure 7.1 summarizes the structure of the action system in terms of the AGIL schema.

The Action System

We are now ready to discuss the overall shape of Parsons's action system. Figure 7.2 outlines Parsons's schema.

It is obvious that Parsons had a clear notion of "levels" of social analysis as well as their interrelationship. The hierarchical arrangement is clear, and the levels

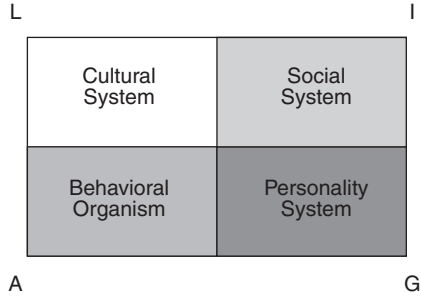


FIGURE 7.1 ***Structure of the General Action System***

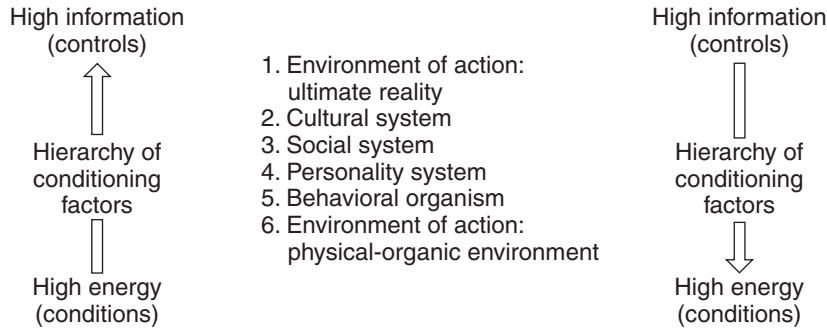


FIGURE 7.2 ***Parsons's Action Schema***

are integrated in Parsons's system in two ways. First, each of the lower levels provides the conditions, the energy, needed for the higher levels. Second, the higher levels control those below them in the hierarchy.

In terms of the environments of the action system, the lowest level, the physical and organic environment, involves the nonsymbolic aspects of the human body, its anatomy and physiology. The highest level, ultimate reality, has, as Jackson Toby suggests, "a metaphysical flavor," but Toby also argues that Parsons "is not referring to the supernatural so much as to the universal tendency for societies to address symbolically the uncertainties, concerns, and tragedies of human existence that challenge the meaningfulness of social organization" (1977:3).

The heart of Parsons's work is found in his four action systems. In the assumptions that Parsons made regarding his action systems we encounter the problem of order that was his overwhelming concern and that has become a major source of criticism of his work (Schwanenberg, 1971). The Hobbesian problem of order—what prevents a social war of all against all—was not answered to Parsons's (1937) satisfaction by the earlier philosophers. Parsons found his answer to the problem of order in structural functionalism, which operates in his view with the following set of assumptions:

1. Systems have the property of order and interdependence of parts.
2. Systems tend toward self-maintaining order, or equilibrium.[3]
3. The system may be static or involved in an ordered process of change.
4. The nature of one part of the system has an impact on the form that the other parts can take.
5. Systems maintain boundaries with their environments.
6. Allocation and integration are two fundamental processes necessary for a given state of equilibrium of a system.

[3] Most often, to Parsons, the problem of order related to the issue of why action was nonrandom or patterned. The issue of equilibrium was a more empirical question to Parsons. Nonetheless, Parsons himself often conflated the issues of order and equilibrium.

7. Systems tend toward self-maintenance involving the maintenance of boundaries and of the relationships of parts to the whole, control of environmental variations, and control of tendencies to change the system from within.

These assumptions led Parsons to make the analysis of the *ordered* structure of society his first priority. In so doing, he did little with the issue of social change, at least until later in his career:

> We feel that it is uneconomical to describe changes in systems of variables before the variables themselves have been isolated and described; therefore, we have chosen to begin by studying particular combinations of variables and to move toward description of how these combinations change only when a firm foundation for such has been laid.
>
> (Parsons and Shils, 1951:6)

Parsons was so heavily criticized for his static orientation that he devoted more and more attention to change; in fact, as we will see, he eventually focused on the evolution of societies. However, in the view of most observers, even his work on social change tended to be highly static and structured.

In reading about the four action systems, the reader should keep in mind that they do not exist in the real world but are, rather, analytical tools for analyzing the real world.

Social System Parsons's conception of the social system begins at the micro level with interaction between ego and alter ego, defined as the most elementary form of the social system. He spent little time analyzing this level, although he did argue that features of this interaction system are present in the more complex forms taken by the social system. Parsons defined a *social system* thus:

> A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors *interacting* with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the "optimization of gratification" and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols.
>
> (Parsons, 1951:5–6)

This definition seeks to define a social system in terms of many of the key concepts in Parsons's work—actors, interaction, environment, optimization of gratification, and culture.

Despite his commitment to viewing the social system as a system of interaction, Parsons did not take interaction as his fundamental unit in the study of the social system. Rather, he used the *status-role* complex as the basic unit of the system. This is neither an aspect of actors nor an aspect of interaction but rather a *structural* component of the social system. *Status* refers to a structural position within the social system, and *role* is what the actor does in such a position, seen in the context of its functional significance for the larger system. The actor is viewed not in terms of thoughts and actions but instead (at least in terms of position in the social system) as nothing more than a bundle of statuses and roles.

In his analysis of the social system, Parsons was interested primarily in its structural components. In addition to a concern with the status-role, Parsons (1966:11) was interested in such large-scale components of social systems as collectivities, norms, and values. In his analysis of the social system, however, Parsons was not simply a structuralist but also a functionalist. He thus delineated a number of the functional prerequisites of a social system. First, social systems must be structured so that they operate compatibly with other systems. Second, to survive, the social system must have the requisite support from other systems. Third, the system must meet a significant proportion of the needs of its actors. Fourth, the system must elicit adequate participation from its members. Fifth, it must have at least a minimum of control over potentially disruptive behavior. Sixth, if conflict becomes sufficiently disruptive, it must be controlled. Finally, a social system requires a language in order to survive.

It is clear in Parsons's discussion of the functional prerequisites of the social system that his focus was large-scale systems and their relationship to one another (societal functionalism). Even when he talked about actors, it was from the point of view of the system. Also, the discussion reflects Parsons's concern with the maintenance of order within the social system.

Actors and the Social System However, Parsons did not completely ignore the issue of the relationship between actors and social structures in his discussion of the social system. In fact, he called the integration of value patterns and need-dispositions "the fundamental dynamic theorem of sociology" (Parsons, 1951:42). Given his central concern with the social system, of key importance in this integration are the processes of internalization and socialization. That is, Parsons was interested in the ways in which the norms and values of a system are transferred to the actors within the system. In a successful socialization process these norms and values are internalized; that is, they become part of the actors' "consciences." As a result, in pursuing their own interests, the actors are in fact serving the interests of the system as a whole. As Parsons put it, "The combination of value-orientation patterns which is acquired [by the actor in socialization] *must in a very important degree be a function of the fundamental role structure and dominant values of the social system*" (1951:227).

In general, Parsons assumed that actors usually are passive recipients in the socialization process.[4] Children learn not only how to act but also the norms and values, the morality, of society. Socialization is conceptualized as a conservative process in which need-dispositions (which are themselves largely molded by society) bind children to the social system, and it provides the means by which the need-dispositions can be satisfied. There is little or no room for creativity; the need for gratification ties children to the system as it exists. Parsons sees socialization as a lifelong experience. Because the norms and values inculcated in childhood tend to be very general, they do not prepare children for the various specific situations they encounter in adulthood. Thus socialization must be supplemented throughout the life cycle with a series of more specific socializing experiences. Despite this

[4] This is a controversial interpretation of Parsons's work with which many disagree. François Bourricaud, for example, talks of "the dialectics of socialization" (1981:108) in Parsons's work and not of passive recipients of socialization.

need later in life, the norms and values learned in childhood tend to be stable and, with a little gentle reinforcement, tend to remain in force throughout life.

Despite the conformity induced by lifelong socialization, there is a wide range of individual variation in the system. The question is: Why is this normally not a major problem for the social system, given its need for order? For one thing, a number of social control mechanisms can be employed to induce conformity. However, as far as Parsons was concerned, social control is strictly a second line of defense. A system runs best when social control is used only sparingly. For another thing, the system must be able to tolerate some variation, some deviance. A flexible social system is stronger than a brittle one that accepts no deviation. Finally, the social system should provide a wide range of role opportunities that allow different personalities to express themselves without threatening the integrity of the system.

Socialization and social control are the main mechanisms that allow the social system to maintain its equilibrium. Modest amounts of individuality and deviance are accommodated, but more extreme forms must be met by reequilibrating mechanisms. Thus, social order is built into the structure of Parsons's social system:

> Without deliberate planning on anyone's part there have developed in our type of social system, and correspondingly in others, mechanisms which, within limits, are capable of forestalling and reversing the deep-lying tendencies for deviance to get into the vicious circle phase which puts it beyond the control of ordinary approval-disapproval and reward-punishment sanctions.
>
> (Parsons, 1951:319)

Again, Parsons's main interest was the system as a whole rather than the actor in the system—how the system controls the actor, not how the actor creates and maintains the system. This reflects Parsons's commitment on this issue to a structural-functional orientation.

Society Although the idea of a social system encompasses all types of collectivities, one specific and particularly important social system is *society,* "a relatively self-sufficient collectivity the members of which are able to satisfy all their individual and collective needs and to live entirely within its framework" (Rocher, 1975:60).[5] As a structural functionalist, Parsons distinguished among four structures, or subsystems, in society in terms of the functions (AGIL) they perform (see Figure 7.3). The *economy* is the subsystem that performs the function for society of adapting to the environment through labor, production, and allocation. Through such work, the economy adapts the environment to society's needs, and it helps society adapt to these external realities. The *polity* (or political system) performs the function of goal attainment by pursuing societal objectives and mobilizing actors and resources to that end. The *fiduciary system* (for example, in the schools, the family) handles the latency function by transmitting culture (norms and values) to actors and allowing it to be internalized by them. Finally, the integration function is performed by the *societal community* (for example, the law), which coordinates the various components of society (Parsons and Platt, 1973).

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[5] Barnard Barber (1993, 1994) argues that while there is considerable terminological confusion in Parsons's work, the idea of a social system should be restricted to inclusive, total systems like societies.

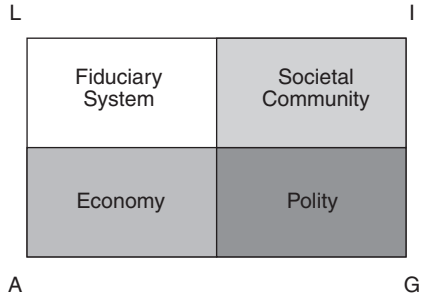

FIGURE 7.3 ***Society, Its Subsystems, and the Functional Imperatives***

As important as the structures of the social system were to Parsons, the cultural system was more important. In fact, as we saw earlier, the cultural system stood at the top of Parsons's action system, and Parsons (1966) labeled himself a "cultural determinist." [6]

Cultural System Parsons conceived of culture as the major force binding the various elements of the social world, or, in his terms, the action system. Culture mediates interaction among actors and integrates the personality and the social systems. Culture has the peculiar capacity to become, at least in part, a component of the other systems. Thus, in the social system culture is embodied in norms and values, and in the personality system it is internalized by the actor. But the cultural system is not simply a part of other systems; it also has a separate existence in the form of the social stock of knowledge, symbols, and ideas. These aspects of the cultural system are available to the social and personality systems, but they do not become part of them (Morse, 1961:105; Parsons and Shils, 1951:6).

Parsons defined the cultural system, as he did his other systems, in terms of its relationship to the other action systems. Thus *culture* is seen as a patterned, ordered system of symbols that are objects of orientation to actors, internalized aspects of the personality system, and institutionalized patterns (Parsons, 1990) in the social system. Because it is largely symbolic and subjective, culture is transmitted readily from one system to another. Culture can move from one social system to another through diffusion and from one personality system to another through learning and socialization. However, the symbolic (subjective) character of culture also gives it another characteristic, the ability to control Parsons's other action systems. This is one of the reasons Parsons came to view himself as a cultural determinist.

However, if the cultural system is preeminent in Parsonsian theory, we must question whether he offers a genuinely integrative theory. As pointed out in the

[6] Interestingly Alexander and Smith (2001:139) describe Parsons as "insufficiently cultural," lacking a "thick description" of culture.

Appendix, a truly integrative theory gives rough equivalency to all major levels of analysis. Cultural determinism, indeed any kind of determinism, is highly suspect from the point of view of an integrated sociology. (For a more integrated conception of Parsons's work, see Camic, 1990.) This problem is exacerbated when we look at the personality system and see how weakly it is developed in Parsons's work.

Personality System The personality system is controlled not only by the cultural system but also by the social system. That is not to say that Parsons did not accord some independence to the personality system:

> My view will be that, while the main content of the structure of the personality is derived from social systems and culture through socialization, the personality becomes an independent system through its relations to its own organism and through the uniqueness of its own life experience; it is not a mere epiphenomenon.
> (Parsons, 1970:82)

We get the feeling here that Parsons is protesting too much. If the personality system is not an epiphenomenon, it is certainly reduced to a secondary or dependent status in his theoretical system.

The *personality* is defined as the organized system of orientation and motivation of action of the individual actor. The basic component of the personality is the "need-disposition." Parsons and Shils defined *need-dispositions* as the "most significant units of motivation of action" (1951:113). They differentiated need-dispositions from drives, which are innate tendencies—"physiological energy that makes action possible" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:111). In other words, drives are better seen as part of the biological organism. Need-dispositions are then defined as "these same tendencies when they are not innate but acquired through the process of action itself" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:111). In other words, need-dispositions are drives that are shaped by the social setting.

Need-dispositions impel actors to accept or reject objects presented in the environment or to seek out new objects if the ones that are available do not adequately satisfy need-dispositions. Parsons differentiated among three basic types of need-dispositions. The first type impels actors to seek love, approval, and so forth, from their social relationships. The second type includes internalized values that lead actors to observe various cultural standards. Finally, there are the role expectations that lead actors to give and get appropriate responses.

This presents a very passive image of actors. They seem to be impelled by drives, dominated by the culture, or, more usually, shaped by a combination of drives and culture (that is, by need-dispositions). A passive personality system is clearly a weak link in an integrated theory, and Parsons seemed to be aware of that. On various occasions, he tried to endow the personality with some creativity. For example, he said: "We do not mean . . . to imply that a person's values are entirely 'internalized culture' or mere adherence to rules and laws. The person makes creative modifications as he internalizes culture; but the novel aspect is not the culture aspect" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:72). Despite claims such as these, the dominant impression that emerges from Parsons's work is one of a passive personality system.

Parsons's emphasis on need-dispositions creates other problems. Because it leaves out so many other important aspects of personality, his system becomes a largely impoverished one. Alfred Baldwin, a psychologist, makes precisely this point:

> It seems fair to say that Parsons fails in his theory to provide the personality with a reasonable set of properties or mechanisms aside from need-dispositions, and gets himself into trouble by not endowing the personality with enough characteristics and enough different kinds of mechanisms for it to be able to function.
>
> (A. Baldwin, 1961:186)

Baldwin makes another telling point about Parsons's personality system, arguing that even when Parsons analyzed the personality system, he was really not focally interested in it: "Even when he is writing chapters on personality structure, Parsons spends many more pages talking about social systems than he does about personality" (1961:180). This is reflected in the various ways Parsons linked the personality to the social system. First, actors must learn to see themselves in a way that fits with the place they occupy in society (Parsons and Shils, 1951:147). Second, role expectations are attached to each of the roles occupied by individual actors. Then there is the learning of self-discipline, internalization of value orientations, identification, and so forth. All these forces point toward the integration of the personality system with the social system, which Parsons emphasized. However, he also pointed out the possible malintegration, which is a problem for the system that needs to be overcome.

Another aspect of Parsons's work—his interest in internalization as the personality system's side of the socialization process—reflects the passivity of the personality system. Parsons (1970:2) derived this interest from Durkheim's work on internalization, as well as from Freud's work, primarily that on the superego. In emphasizing internalization and the superego, Parsons once again manifested his conception of the personality system as passive and externally controlled.

Although Parsons was willing to talk about the subjective aspects of personality in his early work, he progressively abandoned that perspective. In so doing, he limited his possible insights into the personality system. Parsons at one point stated clearly that he was shifting his attention away from the internal meanings that the actions of people may have: "The organization of observational data in terms of the theory of action is quite possible and fruitful in modified behavioristic terms, and such formulation avoids many of the difficult questions of introspection or empathy" (Parsons and Shils, 1951:64).

Behavioral Organism Though he included the behavioral organism as one of the four action systems, Parsons had very little to say about it. It is included because it is the source of energy for the rest of the systems. Although it is based on genetic constitution, its organization is affected by the processes of conditioning and learning that occur during the individual's life.[7] The behavioral organism is clearly a residual system in Parsons's work, but at the minimum Parsons is to be lauded for including it as a part of his sociology, if for no other reason than that he anticipated the interest in sociobiology and the sociology of the body (B. Turner, 1985) by some sociologists.

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[7] Because of this social element, in his later work Parsons dropped the word *organism* and labeled this the "behavioral system" (1975:104).

Change and Dynamism in Parsonsian Theory

Parsons's work with conceptual tools such as the four action systems and the functional imperatives led to the accusation that he offered a structural theory that was unable to deal with social change. Parsons had long been sensitive to this charge, arguing that although a study of change was necessary, it must be preceded by a study of structure. But by the 1960s he could resist the attacks no longer and made a major shift in his work to the study of social change,[8] particularly the study of social evolution (Parsons, 1977:50).

Evolutionary Theory Parsons's (1966) general orientation to the study of social change was shaped by biology. To deal with this process, Parsons developed what he called "a paradigm of evolutionary change."

The first component of that paradigm is the process of *differentiation.* Parsons assumed that any society is composed of a series of subsystems that differ in both their *structure* and their *functional* significance for the larger society. As society evolves, new subsystems are differentiated. This is not enough, however; they also must be more adaptive than earlier subsystems. Thus, the essential aspect of Parsons's evolutionary paradigm was the idea of *adaptive upgrading.* Parsons described this process:

> If differentiation is to yield a balanced, more evolved system, each newly differentiated substructure . . . must have increased adaptive capacity for performing its *primary* function, as compared to the performance of *that* function in the previous, more diffuse structure. . . . We may call this process the *adaptive upgrading* aspect of the evolutionary change cycle.
>
> (Parsons, 1966:22)

This is a highly positive model of social change (although Parsons certainly had a sense of its darker side). It assumes that as society evolves, it grows generally better able to cope with its problems. In contrast, in Marxian theory social change leads to the eventual destruction of capitalist society. For this reason, among others, Parsons often is thought of as a very conservative sociological theorist. In addition, while he did deal with change, he tended to focus on the positive aspects of social change in the modern world rather than on its negative side.

Next, Parsons argued that the process of differentiation leads to a new set of problems of *integration* for society. As subsystems proliferate, the society is confronted with new problems in coordinating the operations of these units.

A society undergoing evolution must move from a system of ascription to one of achievement. A wider array of skills and abilities is needed to handle the more diffuse subsystems. The generalized abilities of people must be freed from their ascriptive bonds so that they can be utilized by society. Most generally, this means that groups formerly excluded from contributing to the system must be freed for inclusion as full members of the society.

Finally, the *value* system of the society as a whole must undergo change as social structures and functions grow increasingly differentiated. However, since the

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[8] To be fair, we must report that Parsons had done some earlier work on social change (see Parsons, 1942, 1947; see also Alexander, 1981; Baum and Lechner, 1981).

new system is more diverse, it is harder for the value system to encompass it. Thus a more differentiated society requires a value system that is "couched at a higher level of generality in order to legitimize the wider variety of goals and functions of its subunits" (Parsons, 1966:23). However, this process of generalization of values often does not proceed smoothly as it meets resistance from groups committed to their own narrow value systems.

Evolution proceeds through a variety of cycles, but no general process affects all societies equally. Some societies may foster evolution, whereas others may "be so beset with internal conflicts or other handicaps" that they impede the process of evolution, or they may even "deteriorate" (Parsons, 1966:23). What most interested Parsons were those societies in which developmental "breakthroughs" occur, since he believed that once they occurred, the process of evolution would follow his general evolutionary model.

Although Parsons conceived of evolution as occurring in stages, he was careful to avoid a unilinear evolutionary theory: "We do not conceive societal evolution to be either a continuous or a simple linear process, but we can distinguish between broad levels of advancement without overlooking the considerable variability found in each" (1966:26). Making it clear that he was simplifying matters, Parsons distinguished three broad evolutionary stages—primitive, intermediate, and modern. Characteristically, he differentiated among these stages primarily on the basis of cultural dimensions. The crucial development in the transition from primitive to intermediate is the development of language, primarily written language. The key development in the shift from intermediate to modern is "the institutionalized codes of normative order," or law (Parsons, 1966:26).

Parsons next proceeded to analyze a series of specific societies in the context of the evolution from primitive to modern society. One particular point is worth underscoring here: Parsons turned to evolutionary theory, at least in part, because he was accused of being unable to deal with social change. However, his analysis of evolution is *not* in terms of process; rather, it is an attempt to "order structural types and relate them sequentially" (Parsons, 1966:111). This is comparative *structural* analysis, not really a study of the processes of social change. Thus, even when he was supposed to be looking at change, Parsons remained committed to the study of structures and functions.

Generalized Media of Interchange One of the ways in which Parsons introduces some dynamism, some fluidity (Alexander, 1983:115), into his theoretical system is through his ideas on the generalized media of interchange within and among the four action systems (especially within the social system) discussed above (Treviño, 2005). The model for the generalized media of interchange is money, which operates as such a medium within the economy. But instead of focusing on material phenomena such as money, Parsons focuses on *symbolic* media of exchange. Even when Parsons does discuss money as a medium of interchange within the social system, he focuses on its symbolic rather than its material qualities. In addition to money, and more clearly symbolic, are other generalized media of interchange—political power, influence, and value commitments. Parsons makes it quite clear why he is focusing on symbolic media of interchange: "The introduction of a theory of media into the kind of structural perspective I have in mind goes far, it seems to me, to refute the frequent allegations that this type of structural analysis is inherently plagued with a static bias, which makes it impossible to do justice to dynamic problems" (1975:98–99).

Symbolic media of interchange have the capacity, like money, to be created and to circulate in the larger society. Thus, within the social system, those in the political system are able to create political power. More important, they can expend that power, thereby allowing it to circulate freely in, and have influence over, the social system. Through such an expenditure of power, leaders presumably strengthen the political system as well as the society as a whole. More generally, it is the generalized media that circulate between the four action systems and within the structures of each of those systems. It is their existence and movement that give dynamism to Parsons's largely structural analyses.

As Alexander (1983:115) points out, generalized media of interchange lend dynamism to Parsons's theory in another sense. They allow for the existence of "media entrepreneurs" (for example, politicians) who do not simply accept the system of exchange as it is. That is, they can be creative and resourceful and in this way alter not only the quantity of the generalized media but also the manner and direction in which the media flow.

Robert Merton's Structural Functionalism

Although Talcott Parsons is the most important structural-functional theorist, his student Robert Merton authored some of the most important statements on structural functionalism in sociology (Sztompka, 2000; Tiryakian, 1991). Merton criticized some of the more extreme and indefensible aspects of structural functionalism. But equally important, his new conceptual insights helped give structural functionalism a continuing usefulness (Jasso, 2000).

Although both Merton and Parsons are associated with structural functionalism, there are important differences between them. For one thing, while Parsons advocated the creation of grand, overarching theories, Merton favored more limited, middle-range theories. For another, Merton was more favorable toward Marxian theories than Parsons was. In fact, Merton and some of his students (especially Alvin Gouldner) can be seen as having pushed structural functionalism more to the left politically.

A Structural-Functional Model

Merton criticized what he saw as the three basic postulates of functional analysis as it was developed by anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. The first is the postulate of the functional unity of society. This postulate holds that all standardized social and cultural beliefs and practices are functional for society as a whole as well as for individuals in society. This view implies that the various parts of a social system must show a high level of integration. However, Merton maintained that although it may be true of small, primitive societies, this generalization cannot be extended to larger, more complex societies.

Universal functionalism is the second postulate. That is, it is argued that *all* standardized social and cultural forms and structures have positive functions. Merton argued that this contradicts what we find in the real world. It is clear that not every structure, custom, idea, belief, and so forth, has positive functions. For example, rabid nationalism can be highly dysfunctional in a world of proliferating nuclear arms.

Third is the postulate of indispensability. The argument here is that all standardized aspects of society not only have positive functions but also represent indispensable parts of the working whole. This postulate leads to the idea that all structures and functions are functionally necessary for society. No other structures and functions could work quite as well as those that are currently found within society. Merton's criticism, following Parsons, was that we must at least be willing to admit that there are various structural and functional alternatives to be found within society.

Merton's position was that all these functional postulates rely on nonempirical assertions based on abstract, theoretical systems. At a minimum, it is the responsibility of the sociologist to examine each empirically. Merton's belief that empirical tests, not theoretical assertions, are crucial to functional analysis led him to develop his "paradigm" of functional analysis as a guide to the integration of theory and research.

Merton made it clear from the outset that structural-functional analysis focuses on groups, organizations, societies, and cultures. He stated that any object that can be subjected to structural-functional analysis must "represent a standardized (that is, patterned and repetitive) item" (Merton, 1949/1968:104). He had in mind such things as "social roles, institutional patterns, social processes, cultural patterns, culturally patterned emotions, social norms, group organization, social structure, devices for social control, etc." (Merton, 1949/1968:104).

Early structural functionalists tended to focus almost entirely on the *functions* of one social structure or institution for another. However, in Merton's view, early analysts tended to confuse the subjective motives of individuals with the functions of structures or institutions. The focus of the structural functionalist should be on social functions rather than on individual motives. *Functions,* according to Merton, are defined as "those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system" (1949/1968:105). However, there is a clear ideological bias when one focuses only on adaptation or adjustment, for they are always positive consequences. It is important to note that one social fact can have negative consequences for another social fact. To rectify this serious omission in early structural functionalism, Merton developed the idea of a *dysfunction.* Just as structures or institutions could contribute to the maintenance of other parts of the social system, they also could have negative consequences for them. Slavery in the southern United States, for example, clearly had positive consequences for white southerners, such as supplying cheap labor, support for the cotton economy, and social status. It also had dysfunctions, such as making southerners overly dependent on an agrarian economy and therefore unprepared for industrialization. The lingering disparity between the North and the South in industrialization can be traced, at least in part, to the dysfunctions of the institution of slavery in the South.

Merton also posited the idea of *nonfunctions,* which he defined as consequences that are simply irrelevant to the system under consideration. Included here might be social forms that are "survivals" from earlier historical times. Although they may have had positive or negative consequences in the past, they have no significant effect on contemporary society. One example, although a few might disagree, is the Women's Christian Temperance Movement.

To help answer the question of whether positive functions outweigh dysfunctions, or vice versa, Merton developed the concept of *net balance.* However, we never

ROBERT K. MERTON

*An Autobiographical Sketch**

It is easy enough to identify the principal teachers, both close at hand and at a distance, who taught me most. During my graduate studies, they were: P. A. Sorokin, who oriented me more widely to European social thought and with whom, unlike some other students of the time, I never broke although I could not follow him in the directions of inquiry he began to pursue in the late 1930s; the then quite young Talcott Parsons, engaged in thinking through the ideas which first culminated in his magisterial *Structure of Social Action;* the biochemist and sometime sociologist L. J. Henderson, who taught me something about the disciplined investigation of what is first entertained as an interesting idea; the economic historian E. F. Gay, who taught me about the workings of economic development as reconstructible from archival sources; and, quite consequentially, the then dean of the history of science, George Sarton, who allowed me to work under his guidance for several years in his famed (not to say, hallowed) workshop in the Widener Library of Harvard. Beyond these teachers with whom I studied directly, I learned most from two sociologists: Emile Durkheim, above all others, and Georg Simmel, who could teach me only through the powerful works they left behind, and from that sociologically sensitive humanist, Gilbert Murray. During the latter period of my life, I learned most from my colleague, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who probably had no idea of how much he taught me during our uncountable conversations and collaborations during more than a third of a century.

Looking back over my work through the years, I find more of a pattern in it than I had supposed was there. For almost from the beginning of my own work, after those apprenticeship years as a graduate student, I was determined to follow my intellectual interests as they evolved rather than pursue a predetermined lifelong plan. I chose to adopt the practice of my master-at-a-distance, Durkheim, rather than the practice of my master-at-close-range, Sarton. Durkheim repeatedly changed the subjects he chose to investigate. Starting with his study of the social division of labor, he examined methods of sociological inquiry and then turned successively to the seemingly unrelated subjects of suicide, religion, moral education, and socialism, all the while developing a theoretical orientation which, to his mind, could be effectively developed by attending to such varied aspects of life in society. Sarton had proceeded quite the other way: in his earliest years as a scholar, he had worked out a program of research in the history of science that was to culminate in his monumental five-volume *Introduction* [sic] to the *History of Science* (which carried the story through to the close of the fourteenth century!).

The first of these patterns seemed more suitable for me. I wanted and still want to advance sociological theories of social structure and cultural change that will help us understand how social institutions and the character of life in society come

to be as they are. That concern with theoretical sociology has led me to avoid the kind of subject specialization that has become (and, in my opinion, has for the most part rightly become) the order of the day in sociology, as in other evolving disciplines. For my purposes, study of a variety of sociological subjects was essential.

In that variety, only one special field—the sociology of science—has persistently engaged my interest. During the 1930s, I devoted myself almost entirely to the social contexts of science and technology, especially in seventeenth-century England, and focused on the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. As my theoretical interests broadened, I turned, during the 1940s and afterward, to studies of the social sources of nonconforming and deviant behavior, of the workings of bureaucracy, mass persuasion, and communication in modern complex society, and to the role of the intellectual, both within bureaucracies and outside them. In the 1950s, I centered on developing a sociological theory of basic units of social structure: the role-set and status-set and the role models people select not only for emulation but also as a source of values adopted as a basis for self-appraisal (this latter being "the theory of reference groups"). I also undertook, with George Reader and Patricia Kendall, the first large-scale sociological study of medical education, aiming to find out how, all apart from explicit plan, different kinds of physicians are socialized in the same schools of medicine, this being linked with the distinctive character of professions as a type of occupational activity. In the 1960s and 1970s, I returned to an intensive study of the social structure of science and its interaction with cognitive structure, these two decades being the time in which the sociology of science finally came of age, with what's past being only prologue. Throughout these studies, my primary orientation was toward the connections between sociological theory, methods of inquiry, and substantive empirical research.

I group these developing interests by decades only for convenience. Of course, they did not neatly come and go in accord with such conventional divisions of the calendar. Nor did all of them go, after the first period of intensive work on them. I am at work on a volume centered on the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action, thus following up a paper first published almost half a century ago and intermittently developed since. Another volume in the stocks, entitled *The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,* follows out in a half-dozen spheres of social life the workings of this pattern as first noted in my paper by the same title, a mere third of a century ago. And should time, patience, and capacity allow, there remains the summation of work on the analysis of social structure, with special reference to status-sets, role-sets, and structural contexts on the structural side, and manifest and latent functions, dysfunctions, functional alternatives, and social mechanisms on the functional side.

Mortality being the rule and painfully slow composition being my practice, there seems small point in looking beyond this series of works in progress.

[For more on Merton, See Johnston, 2007; Sztompka, 2005; and Schultz, 1995.] Robert Merton died on February 23, 2003.

can simply add up positive functions and dysfunctions and objectively determine which outweighs the other, because the issues are so complex and are based on so much subjective judgment that they cannot be calculated and weighed easily. The usefulness of Merton's concept comes from the way it orients the sociologist to the question of relative significance. To return to the example of slavery, the question becomes whether, on balance, slavery was more functional or dysfunctional to the South. Still, this question is too broad and obscures a number of issues (for example, that slavery was functional for groups such as white slaveholders).

To cope with problems like these, Merton added the idea that there must be *levels of functional analysis.* Functionalists had generally restricted themselves to analysis of the society as a whole, but Merton made it clear that analysis also could be done on an organization, institution, or group. Returning to the issue of the functions of slavery for the South, it would be necessary to differentiate several levels of analysis and ask about the functions and dysfunctions of slavery for black families, white families, black political organizations, white political organizations, and so forth. In terms of net balance, slavery was probably more functional for certain social units and more dysfunctional for other social units. Addressing the issue at these more specific levels helps in analyzing the functionality of slavery for the South as a whole.

Merton also introduced the concepts of *manifest* and *latent* functions. These two terms have also been important additions to functional analysis.[9] In simple terms, *manifest functions* are those that are intended, whereas *latent functions* are unintended. The manifest function of slavery, for example, was to increase the economic productivity of the South, but it had the latent function of providing a vast underclass that served to increase the social status of southern whites, both rich and poor. This idea is related to another of Merton's concepts—*unanticipated consequences.* Actions have both intended and unintended consequences. Although everyone is aware of the intended consequences, sociological analysis is required to uncover the unintended consequences; indeed, to some this is the very essence of sociology. Peter Berger (1963) has called this "debunking," or looking beyond stated intentions to real effects.

Merton made it clear that unanticipated consequences and latent functions are not the same. A latent function is one type of unanticipated consequence, one that is functional for the designated system. But there are two other types of unanticipated consequences: "those that are dysfunctional for a designated system, and these comprise the latent dysfunctions," and "those which are irrelevant to the system which they affect neither functionally or dysfunctionally . . . non-functional consequences" (Merton, 1949/1968:105).

As further clarification of functional theory, Merton pointed out that a structure may be dysfunctional for the system as a whole yet may continue to exist. One might

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[9] Colin Campbell (1982) has criticized Merton's distinction between manifest and latent functions. Among other things, he points out that Merton is vague about these terms and uses them in various ways (for example, as intended versus actual consequences and as surface meanings versus underlying realities). More important, he feels that Merton (like Parsons) never adequately integrated action theory and structural functionalism. The result is that we have an uncomfortable mixture of the intentionality ("manifest") of action theory and the structural consequences ("functions") of structural functionalism. Because of these and other confusions, Campbell believes, Merton's distinction between manifest and latent functions is little used in contemporary sociology.

make a good case that discrimination against blacks, females, and other minority groups is dysfunctional for American society, yet it continues to exist because it is functional for a part of the social system; for example, discrimination against females is generally functional for males. However, these forms of discrimination are not without some dysfunctions, even for the group for which they are functional. Males do suffer from their discrimination against females; similarly, whites are hurt by their discriminatory behavior toward blacks. One could argue that these forms of discrimination adversely affect those who discriminate by keeping vast numbers of people underproductive and by increasing the likelihood of social conflict.

Merton contended that not all structures are indispensable to the workings of the social system. Some parts of our social system *can* be eliminated. This helps functional theory overcome another of its conservative biases. By recognizing that some structures are expendable, functionalism opens the way for meaningful social change. Our society, for example, could continue to exist (and even be improved) by the elimination of discrimination against various minority groups.

Merton's clarifications are of great utility to sociologists (for example, Gans, 1972, 1994) who wish to perform structural-functional analyses.

Social Structure and Anomie

Before leaving this section, we must devote some attention to one of the best-known contributions to structural functionalism, indeed to all of sociology (Adler and Laufer, 1995; Menard, 1995; Merton, 1995)—Merton's (1968) analysis of the relationship between culture, structure, and anomie. Merton defines *culture* as "that organized set of *normative values* governing behavior which is common to members of a designated society or group" and *social structure* as "that organized set of *social relationships* in which members of the society or group are variously implicated" (1968:216; italics added). Anomie occurs "when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them" (Merton, 1968:216). That is, because of their position in the social structure of society, some people are unable to act in accord with normative values. The culture calls for some type of behavior that the social structure prevents from occurring.

For example, in American society, the culture places great emphasis on material success. However, by their position within the social structure, many people are prevented from achieving such success. If one is born into the lower socioeconomic classes and as a result is able to acquire, at best, only a high school degree, one's chances of achieving economic success in the generally accepted way (for example, through succeeding in the conventional work world) are slim or nonexistent. Under such circumstances (and they are widespread in contemporary American society) anomie can be said to exist, and as a result, there is a tendency toward deviant behavior. In this context, deviance often takes the form of alternative, unacceptable, and sometimes illegal means of achieving economic success. Thus, becoming a drug dealer or a prostitute in order to achieve economic success is an example of deviance generated by the disjunction between cultural values and social-structural means of attaining those values. This is one way in which the structural functionalist would seek to explain crime and deviance.

Thus, in this example of structural functionalism, Merton is looking at social (and cultural) structures, but he is not focally concerned with the functions of those structures. Rather, consistent with his functional paradigm, he is mainly concerned with dysfunctions, in this case anomie. More specifically, as we have seen, Merton links anomie with deviance and thereby is arguing that disjunctions between culture and structure have the dysfunctional consequence of leading to deviance within society.

It is worth noting that implied in Merton's work on anomie is a critical attitude toward social stratification (for example, for blocking the means of some to socially desirable goals). Thus, while Davis and Moore wrote approvingly of a stratified society, Merton's work indicates that structural functionalists can be critical of social stratification.

The Major Criticisms

No single sociological theory in the history of the discipline has been the focus of as much interest as structural functionalism. By the 1960s, however, criticisms of the theory had increased dramatically, and ultimately they became more prevalent than praise. Mark Abrahamson depicted this situation quite vividly: "Thus, metaphorically, functionalism has ambled along like a giant elephant, ignoring the stings of gnats, even as the swarm of attackers takes its toll" (1978:37).

Substantive Criticisms

One major criticism is that structural functionalism does not deal adequately with history—that it is inherently ahistorical. In fact, structural functionalism was developed, at least in part, in reaction to the historical evolutionary approach of certain anthropologists. In its early years in particular, structural functionalism went too far in its criticism of evolutionary theory and came to focus on either contemporary or abstract societies. However, structural functionalism need not be ahistorical (J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979). In fact, Parsons's (1966, 1971) work on social change, as we have seen, reflects the ability of structural functionalists to deal with change if they so wish.

Structural functionalists also are attacked for being unable to deal effectively with the *process* of social change (Abrahamson, 1978; P. Cohen, 1968; Mills, 1959; J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979).[10] Whereas the preceding criticism deals with the seeming inability of structural functionalism to deal with the past, this one is concerned with the parallel incapacity of the approach to deal with the contemporary process of social change. Percy Cohen (1968) sees the problem as lying in structural-functional theory, in which all the elements of a society are seen as reinforcing one another as well as the system as a whole. This makes it difficult to see how these elements can also contribute to change. While Cohen sees the problem as inherent in the theory, Turner and Maryanski believe, again, that the problem lies with the practitioners and not with the theory.

Perhaps the most often voiced criticism of structural functionalism is that it is unable to deal effectively with conflict (Abrahamson, 1978; P. Cohen, 1968; Gouldner,

[10] However, there are some important works on social change by structural functionalists (C. Johnson, 1966; Smelser, 1959, 1962).

1970; Horowitz, 1962/1967; Mills, 1959; J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979).[11] This criticism takes a variety of forms. Alvin Gouldner argues that Parsons, as the main representative of structural functionalism, tended to overemphasize harmonious relationships. Irving Louis Horowitz contends that structural functionalists tend to see conflict as necessarily destructive and as occurring outside the framework of society. The issue once again is whether this is inherent in the theory or in the way practitioners have interpreted and used it (P. Cohen, 1968; J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979).

The overall criticisms that structural functionalism is unable to deal with history, change, and conflict have led many (for example, P. Cohen, 1968; Gouldner, 1970) to argue that structural functionalism has a conservative bias. It may indeed be true that there is a conservative bias in structural functionalism that is attributable not only to what it ignores (change, history, conflict) but also to what it chooses to focus on. For one thing, structural functionalists have tended to focus on culture, norms, and values (P. Cohen, 1968; Mills, 1959; Lockwood, 1956). People are seen as constrained by cultural and social forces. As Gouldner says, to emphasize his criticism of structural functionalism, "Human beings are as much engaged in using social systems as in being used by them" (1970:220).

Related to their cultural focus is the tendency of structural functionalists to mistake the legitimizations employed by elites in society for social reality (Gouldner, 1970; Harré, 2002; Horowitz, 1962/1967; Mills, 1959). The normative system is interpreted as reflective of the society as a whole, when it may in fact be better viewed as an ideological system promulgated by, and existing for, the elite members of the society.

These substantive criticisms point in two basic directions. First, it seems clear that structural functionalism has a rather narrow focus that prevents it from addressing a number of important issues and aspects of the social world. Second, its focus tends to give it a very conservative flavor; structural functionalism has operated in support of the status quo and the dominant elites (Huaco, 1986).

Methodological and Logical Criticisms

One of the often expressed criticisms (see, for example, Abrahamson, 1978; Mills, 1959) is that structural functionalism is basically vague, unclear, and ambiguous. Part of the ambiguity is traceable to the fact that structural functionalists choose to deal with abstract social systems instead of real societies.

A related criticism is that although no single grand scheme ever can be used to analyze all societies throughout history (Mills, 1959), structural functionalists have been motivated by the belief that there is a single theory or at least a set of conceptual categories that could be used to do this. Many critics regard this grand theory as an illusion, believing that the best sociology can hope for is more historically specific, "middle-range" (Merton, 1968) theories.

Among the other specific methodological criticisms is the issue of whether there are adequate methods to study the questions of concern to structural functionalists. Percy Cohen (1968), for instance, wonders what tools can be used to study the

[11] Again, there are important exceptions—see Coser (1956, 1967), Goode (1960), and Merton (1975).

contribution of one part of a system to the system as a whole. Another methodological criticism is that structural functionalism makes comparative analysis difficult. If the assumption is that a part of a system makes sense only in the context of the social system in which it exists, how can we compare it with a similar part in another system? Cohen asks, for example: If the English family makes sense only in the context of English society, how can we compare it to the French family?

Teleology and Tautology Percy Cohen (1968) and Jonathan Turner and A. Z. Maryanski (1979) see teleology and tautology as the two most important logical problems confronting structural functionalism. Some tend to see teleology as an inherent problem (Abrahamson, 1978; P. Cohen, 1968), but I believe that Turner and Maryanski (1979) are correct when they argue that the problem with structural functionalism is not teleology per se, but *illegitimate* teleology. In this context, *teleology* is defined as the view that society (or other social structures) has purposes or goals. In order to achieve these goals, society creates, or causes to be created, specific social structures and social institutions. Turner and Maryanski do not see this view as necessarily illegitimate; in fact, they argue that social theory *should* take into account the teleological relationship between society and its component parts.

The problem, according to Turner and Maryanski, is the extension of teleology to unacceptable lengths. An illegitimate teleology is one that implies "that purpose or end states guide human affairs when such is not the case" (J. Turner and Maryanski, 1979:118). For example, it is illegitimate to assume that because society needs procreation and socialization it will create the family institution. A variety of alternative structures could meet these needs; society does not "need" to create the family. The structural functionalist must define and document the various ways in which the goals do, in fact, lead to the creation of specific substructures. It also would be useful to be able to show why other substructures could not meet the same needs. A legitimate teleology would be able to define and demonstrate *empirically* and *theoretically* the links between society's goals and the various substructures that exist within society. An illegitimate teleology would be satisfied with a blind assertion that a link between a societal end and a specific substructure must exist.

The other major criticism of the logic of structural functionalism is that it is tautological. A *tautological* argument is one in which the conclusion merely makes explicit what is implicit in the premise or is simply a restatement of the premise. In structural functionalism, this circular reasoning often takes the form of defining the whole in terms of its parts and then defining the parts in terms of the whole. Thus, it would be argued that a social system is defined by the relationship among its component parts and that the component parts of the system are defined by their place in the larger social system. Because each is defined in terms of the other, neither the social system nor its parts are in fact defined at all. We really learn nothing about either the system or its parts.

Neofunctionalism

Under the barrage of criticisms, structural functionalism declined in significance from the mid-1960s to the present day. However, by the mid-1980s, a major effort was undertaken

to revive the theory under the heading "neofunctionalism." The term *neofunctionalism* was used to indicate continuity with structural functionalism but also to demonstrate that an effort was being made to extend structural functionalism and overcome its major difficulties. Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy define *neofunctionalism* as "a self-critical strand of functional theory that seeks to broaden functionalism's intellectual scope while retaining its theoretical core" (1985:11). Thus, it seems clear that Alexander and Colomy see structural functionalism as overly narrow and that their goal is the creation of a more synthetic theory, which they prefer to label "neofunctionalism."[12]

It should be noted that although structural functionalism in general, and Talcott Parsons's theories in particular, did become extremist, there was a strong synthetic core in the theory from its beginnings. On the one hand, throughout his intellectual life Parsons sought to integrate a wide range of theoretical inputs. On the other hand, he was interested in the interrelationship of the major domains of the social world, most notably the cultural, social, and personality systems. However, in the end, Parsons adopted a narrow structural-functionalist orientation and came to see the cultural system as determining the other systems. Thus, Parsons abandoned his synthetic orientation, and neofunctionalism can be viewed as an effort to recapture such an orientation.

Alexander (1985a:10) has enumerated the problems associated with structural functionalism that neofunctionalism needs to surmount, including "anti-individualism," "antagonism to change," "conservatism," "idealism," and an "antiempirical bias." Efforts were made to overcome these problems programmatically (Alexander, 1985b) and at more specific theoretical levels, for example, Colomy's (1986; Alexander and Colomy, 1990b; Colomy and Rhoades, 1994) attempt to refine differentiation theory. Despite his enthusiasm for neofunctionalism, in the mid-1980s Alexander was forced to conclude that "neofunctionalism is a tendency rather than a developed theory" (1985b:16).

Although neofunctionalism may not be a developed theory, Alexander (1985a; see also Colomy, 1990b) has outlined some of its basic orientations. First, neofunctionalism operates with a descriptive model of society that sees society as composed of elements that, in interaction with one another, form a pattern. This pattern allows the system to be differentiated from its environment. Parts of the system are "symbiotically connected," and their interaction is not determined by some overarching force. Thus, neofunctionalism rejects any monocausal determinism and is open-ended and pluralistic.

Second, Alexander argues that neofunctionalism devotes roughly equal attention to action and order. It thus avoids the tendency of structural functionalism to focus almost exclusively on the macro-level sources of order in social structures and culture and to give little attention to more micro-level action patterns (Schwinn, 1998). Neofunctionalism also purports to have a broad sense of action, including not only rational but also expressive action.

Third, neofunctionalism retains the structural-functional interest in integration, not as an accomplished fact but rather as a social *possibility*! It recognizes that deviance and social control are realities within social systems. There is concern for

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[12] J. Turner and A. Z. Maryanski (1988) have challenged neofunctionalism by arguing that it is not really functional in its orientation because it has abandoned many of the basic tenets of structural functionalism.

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

An Autobiographical Sketch

Since my earliest days as an intellectual I have been preoccupied with the problems of social action and social order and with the possibilities of developing approaches to these problems that avoid the extremes of one-dimensional thought. I have always been convinced that tense dichotomies, while vital as ideological currents in a democratic society, can be overcome in the theoretical realm.

My theoretical concerns first took form during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I participated in the student protest movements as an undergraduate at Harvard College and as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. New Left Marxism represented a sophisticated effort to overcome the economism of vulgar Marxism, as it tried to reinsert the actor into history. Because it described how material structures are interpenetrated with culture, personality, and everyday life, New Left Marxism—which for better or worse we largely taught ourselves—provided my first important training in the path to theoretical synthesis, which has marked my intellectual career.

In the early 1970s, I became dissatisfied with New Left Marxism, in part for political and empirical reasons. The New Left's turn toward sectarianism and violence frightened and depressed me, whereas the Watergate crisis demonstrated America's capacity for self-criticism. I decided that capitalist democratic societies provided opportunities for inclusion, pluralism, and reform that could not be envisioned even within the New Left version of Marxian thought.

Yet there were also more abstract theoretical reasons for leaving the Marxian approach to synthesis behind. As I more fully engaged classical and contemporary theory, I realized that this synthesis was achieved more by hyphenating—psychoanalytic-Marxism, cultural-Marxism, phenomenological-Marxism—than by opening up the central categories of action and order. In fact, the neo-Marxist categories of consciousness, action, community, and culture were black boxes. This recognition led me to the traditions that supplied the theoretical resources upon which New Left Marxism had drawn. I was fortunate in this graduate student effort to be guided by Robert Bellah and Neil Smelser, whose ideas about culture, social structure, and sociological theory made an indelible impression upon me and continue to be intellectual resources today.

In *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1982–1983), I published the results of this effort. The idea for this multivolume work began germinating in 1972, after an extraordinary encounter with Talcott Parsons's masterpiece, *The Structure of Social Action,* allowed me to see my problems with Marxism in a new way. Later, under the supervision of Bellah, Smelser, and Leo Lowenthal, I worked through classical and contemporary theory with this new framework in mind.

My ambition in *Theoretical Logic* was to show that Durkheim and Weber supplied extensive theories of the culture that Marx had neglected and that Weber actually developed the first real sociological synthesis. I concluded, however, that Durkheim ultimately moved in an idealistic direction and that Weber developed a mechanistic view of modern society. I suggested that Parsons's work should be seen as a masterly modern effort at synthesis rather than as theory in the functionalist mode. Yet Parsons, too, failed to pursue synthesis in a truly determined way, allowing his theory to become overly formal and normatively based.

In my work over the last decade I have tried to re-create the framework for synthesis, which I take to be the unfulfilled promise of earlier work. In *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II* (1987b), I argued that the divisions in post-Parsonsian sociology—between conflict and order theories, micro and macro approaches, structural and cultural views—were not fruitful. These groupings obscured basic social processes, like the continuing play of order and conflict and the dichotomized dimensions of society, that are always intertwined.

My response to this dead end has been to return to the original concerns of Parsons (Alexander and Colomy, 1990a) and to the earlier classics.

Yet, in trying to push theory into a new, "post-Parsonsian" phase, I have also tried to go beyond classical and modern theory. My encounters with the powerful group of phenomenologists in my home department at UCLA, particularly those with Harold Garfinkel, were an important stimulus. In "Action and Its Environments" (1987a), which I still regard as my most important piece of theoretical work, I laid out the framework for a new articulation of the micro-macro link.

I have also concentrated on developing a new cultural theory. An early reading of Clifford Geertz convinced me that traditional social-science approaches to culture are too limited. Since that time, my approach has been powerfully affected by semiotics, hermeneutics, and poststructuralist thought. Incorporating theories from outside of sociology, I have tried to theorize the manifold ways in which social structure is permeated by symbolic codes and meanings.

I believe this movement toward theoretical synthesis is being pushed forward by events in the world at large. In the postcommunist world, it seems important to develop models that help us understand our complex and inclusive, yet very fragile, democracies. I am presently at work on a theory of democracy that emphasizes the communal dimension, which I call "civil society." I am also publishing a collection of essays I have written criticizing the growing relativism in the human studies. I would like to believe, despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, that progress is possible not only in society but in sociology as well. It is only through a multidimensional and synthetic view of society that such progress can be achieved.

[For more on Alexander see Colomy, 2005.]

equilibrium within neofunctionalism, but it is broader than the structural-functional concern, encompassing both moving and partial equilibrium. There is a disinclination to see social systems as characterized by static equilibrium. *Equilibrium,* broadly defined, is seen as a reference point for functional analysis but not as descriptive of the lives of individuals in actual social systems.

Fourth, neofunctionalism accepts the traditional Parsonsian emphasis on personality, culture, and social system. In addition to being vital to social structure, the interpenetration of these systems also produces tension that is an ongoing source of both change and control.

Fifth, neofunctionalism focuses on social change in the processes of differentiation within the social, cultural, and personality systems. Thus, change is not productive of conformity and harmony but rather "individuation and institutional strains" (Alexander, 1985b:10).

Finally, Alexander argues that neofunctionalism "implies the commitment to the independence of conceptualization and theorizing from other levels of sociological analysis" (1985b:10).

Alexander and Colomy (1990a) staked out a very ambitious claim for neofunctionalism. They did not see neofunctionalism as, in their terms, a mere modest "elaboration," or "revision," of structural functionalism but rather as a much more dramatic "reconstruction" of it in which differences with the founder (Parsons) are clearly acknowledged and explicit openings are made to other theorists and theories.[13] Efforts were made to integrate into neofunctionalism insights from the masters, such as Marx's work on material structures and Durkheim's on symbolism. In an attempt to overcome the idealist bias of Parsonsian structural functionalism, especially its emphasis on macro-subjective phenomena such as culture, more materialist approaches were encouraged. The structural-functional tendency to emphasize order was countered by a call for rapprochement with theories of social change. Most important, to compensate for the macro-level biases of traditional structural functionalism, efforts were made to integrate ideas from exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, phenomenology, and so on. In other words, Alexander and Colomy endeavored to synthesize structural functionalism with a number of other theoretical traditions. Such a reconstruction was supposed to both revive structural functionalism and provide the base for the development of a new theoretical tradition.

Alexander and Colomy recognized an important difference between neofunctionalism and structural functionalism:

> Earlier functional research was guided by . . . envisioning a single, all embracing conceptual scheme that tied areas of specialized research into a tightly wrought package. What neofunctionalist empirical work points to, by contrast, is a loosely organized package, one organized around a general logic and possessing a number of rather autonomous "proliferations" and "variations" at different levels and in different empirical domains.
>
> (Alexander and Colomy, 1990a:52)

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[13] This view seems to be in accord, at least partially, with J. Turner and A. Z. Maryanski's (1988) claim that neofunctionalism has little in common with structural functionalism.

The thoughts of Alexander and Colomy indicate movement away from the Parsonsian tendency to see structural functionalism as a grand overarching theory. Instead, they offer a more limited, a more synthetic, but still a holistic theory.

However, as pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, the future of neofunctionalism has been cast into doubt by the fact that its founder and leading exponent, Jeffrey Alexander, has made it clear that he has outgrown a neofunctionalist orientation. This shift in thinking is apparent in the title of his book, *Neofunctionalism and After* (Alexander, 1998). Alexander argues in this work that one of his major goals was the (re)establishment of the legitimacy and importance of Parsonsian theory. To the degree that neofunctionalism has succeeded in this effort, Alexander regards the neofunctionalist project as completed. Thus, he is ready to move beyond Parsons, beyond neofunctionalism, although he makes it plain that his future theoretical directions will be deeply indebted to both. Neofunctionalism has grown too confining for Alexander, and he now sees it, as well as his own work, as part of what he has called "the new theoretical movement" (see Seidman and Alexander, 2001). As he puts it, "I am pointing to a new wave of theory creation that goes beyond the important achievements of neofunctionalism" (Alexander, 1998:228). Such a theoretical perspective would be even more synthetic than neofunctionalism, and more eclectic, drawing on a wide range of theoretical resources, and it would use those synthetic and eclectic resources in more opportunistic ways. Specifically, Alexander is seeking to do much more with developments in microsociological and cultural theory.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory can be seen as a development that took place, at least in part, in reaction to structural functionalism and as a result of many of the criticisms discussed earlier. However, it should be noted that conflict theory has various other roots, such as Marxian and Weberian theory and Simmel's work on social conflict (Sanderson, 2007; J. Turner, 2005). In the 1950s and 1960s, conflict theory provided an alternative to structural functionalism, but it was superseded by a variety of neo-Marxian theories (see Chapter 8). Indeed, one of the major contributions of conflict theory was the way it laid the groundwork for theories more faithful to Marx's work, theories that came to attract a wide audience in sociology. The basic problem with conflict theory is that it never succeeded in divorcing itself sufficiently from its structural-functional roots. It was more a kind of structural functionalism turned on its head than a truly critical theory of society.

The Work of Ralf Dahrendorf

Like functionalists, conflict theorists are oriented toward the study of social structures and institutions. In the main, this theory is little more than a series of contentions that are often the direct opposites of functionalist positions. This antithesis is best exemplified by the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1958, 1959; see also Strasser and Nollman, 2005), in which the tenets of conflict and functional theory are juxtaposed. To the functionalists, society is static or, at best, in a state of moving equilibrium, but to Dahrendorf and the conflict theorists, every society at every point is subject to processes of change. Where

functionalists emphasize the orderliness of society, conflict theorists see dissension and conflict at every point in the social system. Functionalists (or at least early functionalists) argue that every element in society contributes to stability; the exponents of conflict theory see many societal elements as contributing to disintegration and change.

Functionalists tend to see society as being held together informally by norms, values, and a common morality. Conflict theorists see whatever order there is in society as stemming from the coercion of some members by those at the top. Where functionalists focus on the cohesion created by shared societal values, conflict theorists emphasize the role of power in maintaining order in society.

Dahrendorf (1959, 1968) is the major exponent of the position that society has two faces (conflict and consensus) and that sociological theory therefore should be divided into two parts, conflict theory and consensus theory. Consensus theorists should examine value integration in society, and conflict theorists should examine conflicts of interest and the coercion that holds society together in the face of these stresses. Dahrendorf recognized that society could not exist without both conflict and consensus, which are prerequisites for each other. Thus, we cannot have conflict unless there is some prior consensus. For example, French housewives are highly unlikely to conflict with Chilean chess players because there is no contact between them, no prior integration to serve as a basis for a conflict. Conversely, conflict can lead to consensus and integration. An example is the alliance between the United States and Japan that developed after World War II.

Despite the interrelationship between consensus and conflict, Dahrendorf was not optimistic about developing a single sociological theory encompassing both processes: "It seems at least conceivable that unification of theory is not feasible at a point which has puzzled thinkers ever since the beginning of Western philosophy" (1959:164). Eschewing a singular theory, Dahrendorf set out to construct a conflict theory of society.[14]

Dahrendorf began with, and was heavily influenced by, structural functionalism. He noted that to the functionalist, the social system is held together by voluntary cooperation or general consensus or both. However, to the conflict (or coercion) theorist, society is held together by "enforced constraint"; thus, some positions in society are delegated power and authority over others. This fact of social life led Dahrendorf to his central thesis that the differential distribution of authority "invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflicts" (1959:165).

Authority

Dahrendorf concentrated on larger social structures.[15] Central to his thesis is the idea that various positions within society have different amounts of authority. Authority does not reside in individuals but in positions. Dahrendorf was interested not only in

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[14] Dahrendorf called conflict and coercion "the ugly face of society" (1959:164). We can ponder whether a person who regards them as "ugly" can develop an adequate theory of conflict and coercion.

[15] In his other work, Dahrendorf (1968) continued to focus on social facts (for example, positions and roles), but he also manifested a concern for the dangers of reification endemic to such an approach.

the structure of these positions but also in the conflict among them: "The *structural* origin of such conflicts must be sought in the arrangement of social roles endowed with expectations of domination or subjection" (1959:165; italics added). The first task of conflict analysis, to Dahrendorf, was to identify various authority roles within society. In addition to making the case for the study of large-scale structures such as authority roles, Dahrendorf was opposed to those who focus on the individual level. For example, he was critical of those who focus on the psychological or behavioral characteristics of the individuals who occupy such positions. He went so far as to say that those who adopted such an approach were not sociologists.

The authority attached to positions is the key element in Dahrendorf's analysis. Authority always implies both superordination and subordination. Those who occupy positions of authority are expected to control subordinates; that is, they dominate because of the expectations of those who surround them, not because of their own psychological characteristics. Like authority, these expectations are attached to positions, not people. Authority is not a generalized social phenomenon; those who are subject to control, as well as permissible spheres of control, are specified in society. Finally, because authority is legitimate, sanctions can be brought to bear against those who do not comply.

Authority is not a constant as far as Dahrendorf was concerned, because authority resides in positions, not in persons. Thus, a person of authority in one setting does not necessarily hold a position of authority in another setting. Similarly, a person in a subordinate position in one group may be in a superordinate position in another. This follows from Dahrendorf's argument that society is composed of a number of units that he called *imperatively coordinated associations.* These may be seen as associations of people controlled by a hierarchy of authority positions. Since society contains many such associations, an individual can occupy a position of authority in one and a subordinate position in another.

Authority within each association is dichotomous; thus two, and only two, conflict groups can be formed within any association. Those in positions of authority and those in positions of subordination hold certain interests that are "contradictory in substance and direction." Here we encounter another key term in Dahrendorf's theory of conflict—*interests.* Groups on top and at the bottom are defined by common interests. Dahrendorf continued to be firm in his thinking that even these interests, which sound so psychological, are basically large-scale phenomena:

> For purposes of the sociological analysis of conflict groups and group conflicts, it is necessary to assume certain *structurally generated* orientations of the actions of incumbents of defined *positions.* By analogy to conscious ("subjective") orientations of action, it appears justifiable to describe these as interests. . . . The assumption of "objective" interests associated with social positions has *no psychological implications* or ramifications; it belongs to the level of sociological analysis proper.
>
> (Dahrendorf, 1959:175; italics added)

Within every association, those in dominant positions seek to maintain the status quo while those in subordinate positions seek change. A conflict of interest within any association is at least latent at all times, which means that the legitimacy of authority is *always* precarious. This conflict of interest need not be conscious in order for

superordinates or subordinates to act. The interests of superordinates and subordinates are objective in the sense that they are reflected in the expectations (roles) attached to positions. Individuals do not have to internalize these expectations or even be conscious of them in order to act in accord with them. If they occupy given positions, they will behave in the expected manner. Individuals are "adjusted" or "adapted" to their roles when they contribute to conflict between superordinates and subordinates. Dahrendorf called these unconscious role expectations *latent interests. Manifest interests* are latent interests that have become conscious. Dahrendorf saw the analysis of the connection between latent and manifest interests as a major task of conflict theory. Nevertheless, actors need not be conscious of their interests in order to act in accord with them.

Groups, Conflict, and Change

Next, Dahrendorf distinguished three broad types of groups. The first is the *quasi group,* or "aggregates of incumbents of positions with identical role interests" (Dahrendorf, 1959:180). These are the recruiting grounds for the second type of group—*the interest group.* Dahrendorf described the two groups:

> Common modes of behavior are characteristic of *interest groups* recruited from larger quasi-groups. Interest groups are groups in the strict sense of the sociological term; and they are the real agents of group conflict. They have a structure, a form of organization, a program or goal, and a personnel of members.
>
> (Dahrendorf, 1959:180)

Out of all the many interest groups emerge *conflict groups,* or those that actually engage in group conflict.

Dahrendorf felt that the concepts of latent and manifest interests, of quasi groups, interest groups, and conflict groups, were basic to an explanation of social conflict. Under *ideal* conditions no other variables would be needed. However, because conditions are never ideal, many different factors do intervene in the process. Dahrendorf mentioned technical conditions such as adequate personnel, political conditions such as the overall political climate, and social conditions such as the existence of communication links. The way people are recruited into the quasi group was another social condition important to Dahrendorf. He felt that if the recruitment is random and is determined by chance, an interest group, and ultimately a conflict group, is unlikely to emerge. In contrast to Marx, Dahrendorf did not feel that the *lumpenproletariat*[16] would ultimately form a conflict group, because people are recruited to it by chance. However, when recruitment to quasi groups is structurally determined, these groups provide fertile recruiting grounds for interest groups and, in some cases, conflict groups.

The final aspect of Dahrendorf's conflict theory is the relationship of conflict to change. Here Dahrendorf recognized the importance of Lewis Coser's work (see the next section), which focused on the functions of conflict in maintaining the status quo. Dahrendorf felt, however, that the conservative function of conflict is only one part of social reality; conflict also leads to change and development.

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[16] This is Marx's term for the mass of people at the bottom of the economic system, those who stand below even the proletariat.

Briefly, Dahrendorf argued that once conflict groups emerge, they engage in actions that lead to changes in social structure. When the conflict is intense, the changes that occur are radical. When it is accompanied by violence, structural change will be sudden. Whatever the nature of conflict, sociologists must be attuned to the relationship between conflict and change as well as that between conflict and the status quo.

The Major Criticisms and Efforts to Deal with Them

Conflict theory has been criticized on a variety of grounds. For example, it has been attacked for ignoring order and stability, whereas structural functionalism has been criticized for ignoring conflict and change. Conflict theory has also been criticized for being ideologically radical, whereas functionalism was criticized for its conservative ideology. In comparison to structural functionalism, conflict theory is rather underdeveloped. It is not nearly as sophisticated as functionalism, perhaps because it is a more derivative theory.

Dahrendorf's conflict theory has been subjected to a number of critical analyses (for example, Hazelrigg, 1972; J. Turner, 1973; Weingart, 1969), including some critical reflections by Dahrendorf (1968) himself. First, Dahrendorf's model is not as clear a reflection of Marxian ideas as he claimed. Second, as has been noted, conflict theory has more in common with structural functionalism than with Marxian theory. Dahrendorf's emphasis on such things as systems (imperatively coordinated associations), positions, and roles links him directly to structural functionalism. As a result, his theory suffers from many of the same inadequacies as structural functionalism. For example, conflict seems to emerge mysteriously from legitimate systems (just as it does in structural functionalism). Further, conflict theory seems to suffer from many of the same conceptual and logical problems (for example, vague concepts, tautologies) as structural functionalism (J. Turner, 1975, 1982). Finally, like structural functionalism, conflict theory is almost wholly macroscopic and as a result has little to offer to our understanding of individual thought and action.

Both functionalism and Dahrendorf's conflict theory are inadequate because each is itself useful for explaining only a *portion* of social life. Sociology must be able to explain order as well as conflict, structure as well as change. This has motivated several efforts to reconcile conflict and functional theory. Although none has been totally satisfactory, these efforts suggest at least some agreement among sociologists that what is needed is a theory explaining *both* consensus and dissension. Still, not all theorists seek to reconcile these conflicting perspectives. Dahrendorf, for example, saw them as alternative perspectives to be used situationally. According to Dahrendorf, when we are interested in conflict, we should use conflict theory; when we wish to examine order, we should take a functional perspective. This position seems unsatisfactory because there is a strong need for a theoretical perspective that enables us to deal with conflict and order *simultaneously.*

The criticisms of conflict theory and structural functionalism, as well as the inherent limitations in each, led to many efforts to cope with the problems by reconciling or integrating the two theories (K. Bailey, 1997; Chapin, 1994; Himes, 1966; van den Berghe, 1963). The assumption was that some combination of the two theories

would be more powerful than either one alone. The best known of these works was Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956).

The early seminal work on the functions of social conflict was done by Georg Simmel, but it has been expanded by Coser (Delaney, 2005a; Jaworski, 1991), who argued that conflict may serve to solidify a loosely structured group. In a society that seems to be disintegrating, conflict with another society may restore the integrative core. The cohesiveness of Israeli Jews might be attributed, at least in part, to the long-standing conflict with the Arab nations in the Middle East. The possible end of the conflict might well exacerbate underlying strains in Israeli society. Conflict as an agent for solidifying a society is an idea that has long been recognized by propagandists, who may construct an enemy where none exists or seek to fan antagonisms toward an inactive opponent.

Conflict with one group may serve to produce cohesion by leading to a series of alliances with other groups. For example, conflict with the Arabs has led to an alliance between the United States and Israel. Lessening of the Israeli-Arab conflict might weaken the bonds between Israel and the United States.

Within a society, conflict can bring some ordinarily isolated individuals into an active role. The protests over the Vietnam War motivated many young people to take vigorous roles in American political life for the first time. With the end of that conflict, a more apathetic spirit emerged again among American youth.

Conflict also serves a communication function. Prior to conflict, groups may be unsure of their adversary's position, but as a result of conflict, positions and boundaries between groups often become clarified. Individuals therefore are better able to decide on a proper course of action in relation to their adversary. Conflict also allows the parties to get a better idea of their relative strengths and may well increase the possibility of rapprochement, or peaceful accommodation.

From a theoretical perspective, it is possible to wed functionalism and conflict theory by looking at the functions of social conflict. Still, it must be recognized that conflict also has dysfunctions.

While a number of theorists sought to integrate conflict theory with structural functionalism, others wanted no part of conflict theory (or structural functionalism). For example, the Marxist Andrè Gunder Frank (1966/1974) rejected conflict theory because it represented an inadequate form of Marxian theory. Although conflict theory has some Marxian elements, it is not the true heir of Marx's original theory. In the next chapter we examine an array of theories that are more legitimate heirs. Before we do, however, we must deal with a more successfully integrative type of conflict theory.

A More Integrative Conflict Theory

Randall Collins's *Conflict Sociology* (1975; Rossel and Collins, 2001) moved in a much more micro-oriented direction than the macro conflict theory of Dahrendorf and others. Collins says of his early work, "My own main contribution to conflict theory . . . was to add a micro level to these macro-level theories. I especially tried to show that stratification and organization are grounded in the interactions of everyday life" (1990:72).[17]

[17] Collins also stresses that conflict theory, more than other sociological theories, has been open to the integration of the findings of empirical research.

Collins made it clear that his focus on conflict would not be ideological; that is, he did not begin with the political view that conflict is either good or bad. Rather, he claimed, he chose conflict as a focus on the realistic ground that conflict is a—perhaps *the*—central process in social life.

Unlike others who started, and stayed, at the societal level, Collins approached conflict from an individual point of view because his theoretical roots lie in phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Despite his preference for individual-level and small-scale theories, Collins was aware that "sociology cannot be successful on the microlevel alone" (1975:11); conflict theory cannot do without the societal level of analysis. However, whereas most conflict theorists believed that social structures are external to, and coercive of, the actor, Collins saw social structures as inseparable from the actors who construct them and whose interaction patterns are their essence. Collins was inclined to see social structures as interaction patterns rather than as external and coercive entities. In addition, whereas most conflict theorists saw the actor as constrained by external forces, Collins viewed the actor as constantly creating and re-creating social organization.

Collins saw Marxian theory as the "starting point" for conflict theory, but it is, in his view, laden with problems. For one thing, he saw it (like structural functionalism) as heavily ideological, a characteristic he wanted to avoid. For another, he tended to see Marx's orientation as reducible to an analysis of the economic domain, although this is an unwarranted criticism of Marx's theory. Actually, although Collins invoked Marx frequently, his conflict theory shows relatively little Marxian influence. It is far more influenced by Weber, Durkheim, and above all phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

Social Stratification

Collins chose to focus on social stratification because it is an institution that touches so many features of life, including "wealth, politics, careers, families, clubs, communities, lifestyles" (1975:49). In Collins's view, the great theories of stratification are "failures." He criticized Marxian theory as "a monocausal explanation for a multicausal world" (R. Collins, 1975:49). He viewed Weber's theory as little more than an "anti-system" with which to view the features of the two great theories. Weber's work was of some use to Collins, but "the efforts of phenomenological sociology to ground all concepts in the observables of every life" (R. Collins, 1975:53) were the most important to him because his major focus in the study of social stratification was small-scale, not large-scale. In his view, social stratification, like all other social structures, is reducible to people in everyday life encountering each other in patterned ways.

Despite his ultimate commitment to a microsociology of stratification, Collins began (even though he had some reservations about them) with the large-scale theories of Marx and Weber as underpinnings for his work. He started with Marxian principles, arguing that they, "with certain modifications, provide the basis for a conflict theory of stratification" (R. Collins, 1975:58).

First, Collins contended that it was Marx's view that the material conditions involved in earning a living in modern society are the major determinants of a person's lifestyle. The basis of earning a living for Marx is a person's relationship to private property. Those who own or control property are able to earn their livings in a much

more satisfactory way than are those who do not and who must sell their labor time to gain access to the means of production.

Second, from a Marxian perspective, material conditions affect not only how individuals earn a living but also the nature of social groups in the different social classes. The dominant social class is better able to develop more coherent social groups, tied together by intricate communication networks, than is the subordinate social class.

Finally, Collins argued that Marx also pointed out the vast differences among the social classes in their access to, and control over, the cultural system. That is, the upper social classes are able to develop highly articulated symbol and ideological systems, systems that they often are able to impose on the lower social classes. The lower social classes have less-developed symbol systems, many of which are likely to have been imposed on them by those in power.

Collins viewed Weber as working within and developing further Marx's theory of stratification. For one thing, Weber was said to have recognized the existence of different forms of conflict that lead to a multifaceted stratification system (for example, class, status, and power). For another, Weber developed the theory of organizations to a high degree, which Collins saw as still another arena of conflict of interest. Weber was also important to Collins for his emphasis on the state as the agency that controls the means of violence, which shifted attention from conflict over the economy (means of production) to conflict over the state. Finally, Weber was recognized by Collins for his understanding of the social arena of emotional products, particularly religion. Conflict clearly can occur in this arena, and these emotional products, like other products, can be used as weapons in social conflict.

A Conflict Theory of Stratification With this background, Collins turned to his own conflict approach to stratification, which has more in common with phenomenological and ethnomethodological theories than with Marxian or Weberian theory. Collins opened with several assumptions. People are seen as inherently sociable but also as particularly conflict-prone in their social relations. Conflict is likely to occur in social relations because "violent coercion" can always be used by one person or many people in an interaction setting. Collins believed that people seek to maximize their "subjective status" and that their ability to do this depends on their resources as well as the resources of those with whom they are dealing. He saw people as self-interested; thus, clashes are possible because sets of interests may be inherently antagonistic.

This conflict approach to stratification can be reduced to three basic principles. First, Collins believed that people live in self-constructed subjective worlds. Second, other people may have the power to affect, or even control, an individual's subjective experience. Third, other people frequently try to control the individual, who opposes them. The result is likely to be interpersonal conflict.

On the basis of this approach, Collins developed five principles of conflict analysis that he applied to social stratification, although he believed that they could be applied to any area of social life. First, Collins believed that conflict theory must focus on real life rather than on abstract formulations. This belief seems to reflect a preference for a Marxian-style material analysis over the abstraction of structural

functionalism. Collins urged us to think of people as animals whose actions, motivated by self-interest, can be seen as maneuvers to obtain various advantages so that they can achieve satisfaction and avoid dissatisfaction. However, unlike exchange and rational choice theorists, Collins did not see people as wholly rational. He recognized that they are vulnerable to emotional appeals in their efforts to find satisfaction.

Second, Collins believed that a conflict theory of stratification must examine the material arrangements that affect interaction. Although the actors are likely to be affected by material factors such as "the physical places, the modes of communication, the supply of weapons, devices for staging one's public impression, tools, goods" (R. Collins, 1975:60), not all actors are affected in the same way. A major variable is the resources that the different actors possess. Actors with considerable material resources can resist or even modify these material constraints, whereas those with fewer resources are more likely to have their thoughts and actions determined by their material setting.

Third, Collins argued that in a situation of inequality, those groups that control resources are likely to try to exploit those that lack resources. He was careful to point out that such exploitation need not involve conscious calculation on the part of those who gain from the situation; rather, the exploiters are merely pursuing what they perceive to be their best interests. In the process they may be taking advantage of those who lack resources.

Fourth, Collins wanted the conflict theorist to look at such cultural phenomena as beliefs and ideals from the point of view of interests, resources, and power. It is likely that those groups with resources and, therefore, power can impose their idea systems on the entire society; those without resources have an idea system imposed on them.

Finally, Collins made a firm commitment to the scientific study of stratification and every other aspect of the social world. Thus, he prescribed several things: Sociologists should not simply theorize about stratification but should study it empirically, if possible, in a comparative way. Hypotheses should be formulated and tested empirically through comparative studies. Last, the sociologist should look for the causes of social phenomena, particularly the multiple causes of any form of social behavior.

This kind of scientific commitment led Collins to develop a wide array of propositions about the relationship between conflict and various specific aspects of social life. We can present only a few here, but they should allow readers to get a feel for Collins's type of conflict sociology.

> **1.0** Experiences of giving and taking orders are the main determinants of individual outlooks and behaviors.
>
> **1.1** The more one gives orders, the more he is proud, self-assured, formal, and identifies with organizational ideals in whose names he justifies the orders.
>
> **1.2** The more one takes orders, the more he is subservient, fatalistic, alienated from organizational ideals, externally conforming, distrustful of others, concerned with extrinsic rewards, and amoral.
>
> (R. Collins, 1975:73–74)

Among other things, these propositions all reflect Collins's commitment to the *scientific study* of the small-scale social manifestations of social conflicts.

Other Social Domains

Collins was not content to deal with conflict within the stratification system but sought to extend it to various other social domains. For example, he extended his analysis of stratification to relationships between the sexes as well as among age groups. He took the view that the family is an arena of sexual conflict, in which males have been the victors, with the result that women are dominated by men and are subject to various kinds of unequal treatment. Similarly, he saw the relationship between age groups—in particular, between young and old—as one of conflict. This idea contrasts with the view of structural functionalists, who saw harmonious socialization and internalization in this relationship. Collins looked at the resources possessed by the various age groups. Adults have a variety of resources, including experience, size, strength, and the ability to satisfy the physical needs of the young. In contrast, one of the few resources young children have is physical attractiveness. This means that young children are likely to be dominated by adults. However, as children mature, they acquire more resources and are better able to resist, with the result of increasing social conflict between the generations.

Collins also looked at formal organizations from a conflict perspective. He saw them as networks of interpersonal influences and as the arenas in which conflicting interests are played out. In short, "Organizations are arenas for struggle" (R. Collins, 1975:295). Collins again couched his argument in propositional form. For example, he argued that "coercion leads to strong efforts to avoid being coerced" (R. Collins, 1975:298). In contrast, he felt that the offering of rewards is a preferable strategy: "Control by material rewards leads to compliance to the extent that rewards are directly linked to the desired behavior" (R. Collins, 1975:299). These propositions and others all point to Collins's commitment to a scientific, largely micro-oriented study of conflict.

In sum, Collins is, like Dahrendorf, not a true exponent of Marxian conflict theory, although for different reasons. Although Collins used Marx as a starting point, Weber, Durkheim, and particularly ethnomethodology were much more important influences on his work. Collins's small-scale orientation is a helpful beginning toward the development of a more integrated conflict theory. However, despite his stated intentions of integrating large- and small-scale theory, he did not accomplish that task fully.

Summary

Not too many years ago, structural functionalism was *the* dominant theory in sociology. Conflict theory was its major challenger and was the likely alternative to replace it in that position. However, dramatic changes have taken place in recent years. Both theories have been the subject of intense criticism, whereas a series of alternative theories (to be discussed throughout the rest of this book) have developed that have attracted ever greater interest and ever larger followings.

Although several varieties of structural functionalism exist, the focus here is on societal functionalism and its large-scale focus, its concern with interrelationships at the societal level and with the constraining effects of social structures and institutions on actors. Structural functionalists developed a series of large-scale concerns in social systems, subsystems, relationships among subsystems and systems, equilibrium, and orderly change.

We examine three bodies of work by structural functionalists (Davis and Moore, Parsons, and Merton). Davis and Moore, in one of the best-known and most criticized pieces in the history of sociology, examined social stratification as a social system and the various positive functions it performs. We also discuss in some detail Talcott Parsons's structural-functional theory and his ideas on the four functional imperatives of all action systems—adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency (AGIL). We also analyze his structural-functional approach to the four action systems—the social system, cultural system, personality system, and behavioral organism. Finally, we deal with his structural-functional approach to dynamism and social change—his evolutionary theory and his ideas on the generalized media of interchange.

Merton's effort to develop a "paradigm" for functional analysis is the most important single piece in modern structural functionalism. Merton began by criticizing some of the more naive positions of structural functionalism. He then sought to develop a more adequate model of structural-functional analysis. On one point Merton agreed with his predecessors—the need to focus on large-scale social phenomena. But, Merton argued, in addition to focusing on positive functions, structural functionalism should be concerned with dysfunctions and even nonfunctions. Given these additions, Merton urged that analysts concern themselves with the net balance of functions and dysfunctions. Further, he argued, in performing structural-functional analysis, we must move away from global analyses and specify the *levels* on which we are working. Merton also added the idea that structural functionalists should be concerned not only with manifest (intended) but also with latent (unintended) functions. This section concludes with a discussion of Merton's application of his functional paradigm to the issue of the relationship of social structure and culture to anomie and deviance.

Next, we discuss the numerous criticisms of structural functionalism that have succeeded in damaging its credibility and popularity. We discuss the criticisms that structural functionalism is ahistorical, unable to deal with conflict and change, highly conservative, preoccupied with societal constraints on actors, accepting of elite legitimations, teleological, and tautological.

The criticisms of structural functionalism led to an effort to respond to them—the development of an orientation known as neofunctionalism. Neofunctionalism sought to buttress structural functionalism by synthesizing it with a wide array of other theoretical perspectives. A fair amount of work was done under the rubric of neofunctionalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it attracted considerable attention. However, its future is questionable, especially since its founder, Jeffrey Alexander, has moved beyond it theoretically.

The last part of this chapter is devoted to the major alternative to structural functionalism in the 1950s and 1960s—conflict theory. The best-known work in this

tradition is by Ralf Dahrendorf, who, although he consciously tried to follow the Marxian tradition, is best seen as having inverted structural functionalism. Dahrendorf looked at change rather than equilibrium, conflict rather than order, how the parts of society contribute to change rather than to stability, and conflict and coercion rather than normative constraint. Dahrendorf offered a large-scale theory of conflict that parallels the structural functionalist's large-scale theory of order. His focus on authority, positions, imperatively coordinated associations, interests, quasi groups, interest groups, and conflict groups reflects this orientation. Dahrendorf's theory suffers from some of the same problems as structural functionalism; in addition, it represents a rather impoverished effort to incorporate Marxian theory. Dahrendorf also can be criticized for being satisfied with alternative theories of order and conflict rather than seeking a theoretical integration of the two.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of Randall Collins's effort to develop a more integrative conflict theory, especially one that integrates micro and macro concerns.