

The Symbolically Functioning Conflict:

An essay identifying the foci of the conflict, functionalist, and symbolic interactionist perspectives and their relationship to the behavior of citizens and dynamics of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina

Have you ever talked to anyone about the Presidential election, politics in the workforce, or more recently, hurricane Katrina? If you have, you've surely heard many different opinions and interpretations about any of those issues. Just like each of those conversational topics have multiple viewpoints, sociologists tend to have their own interpretations, or perspectives, on societal matters.

Sociological perspectives can be broken down into four main categories. Those categories are the conflict, functionalist, symbolic interactionist, and postmodernist groupings—the last of which is not incredibly widespread like the other three. The perspectives don't act, necessarily, as differing schools of thought in sociology, but rather different methods used to explain sociological events and issues.

Firstly, Kendall defines the conflict perspective as the organizational method that “views groups in society as engaged in a continuous power struggle” for goods (especially “scarce” ones) and services. This idea tends to always separate the people in a certain society by their economic class. That is, people are either wealthy, middle-class, or poor. Those that are wealthy are the ones that have the most power and control over the “scarce resources” and can appropriate those goods to the general public as they see fit. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of oil distributors and rig operators, natural gas disbursement facilities, and electric power plants are prime examples of people that would fall under the “wealthy” category. Members of the public that are consumers of each of these products (or byproducts) would be categorized as the middle-class citizens, or the poor. The power struggle exists, then, between the consumers and the producers. Citizens use gasoline in their cars to get to work and make money; the money that pays the CEOs of the oil distribution centers that develop the gasoline for the citizen's cars. Therefore, the cycle of money disbursement from consumers to the producers is harmonious. However, when corruption occurs or the wealthy producers decide they can charge more money for their products, a struggle develops.

Karl Marx—a leading driver of the conflict perspective—called the members of the wealthy production class the “bourgeoisie” and the workers that consumed those products the “proletariat.” Marx thought that the bourgeoisie would exploit their power and make it quite difficult for the proletariat to survive. This “feeling of powerlessness and estrangement from other[s]” is what Marx defined as *“alienation.”* (Kendall)

Secondly, the functionalist perspective is elucidated as the idea that “society is a stable, orderly system.” (Kendall) To better understand the functionalist approach to sociology, picture a computer. There are several components to a computer that make it work correctly. The main parts are the motherboard, RAM, the harddrive, the processor, the video card, and the monitor. A very basic explanation of how the computer works is that you click on a program, that command is interpreted by the processor, and sent across the motherboard to the harddrive to retrieve the data needed to open that particular program. Once that program is initiated, it loads into RAM, and the program then sends the visual infrastructure information through the video card and out to the monitor so that you can see it. There are several other components and processes involved in the opening of a program on a computer, but that is the basis. In that example, what would happen if you removed the harddrive? The RAM? The processor? The computer wouldn’t work if it was missing any of those parts. Functionalists believe that society is comprised in the same way. Society is an interrelation of particular groups, institutions, and governmental bodies that provide a certain level of stability to the people living in it. When corruption or other destructive forces are present in **any** of those societal parts, the society is thrown into a state of chaos, which Emile Durkheim called *“anomie.”* (Kendall)

Thirdly, and lastly, Kendall ascertains that the symbolic interactionist perspective as the worldview that interprets “society as the sum of the interactions of individuals and groups.” Considering that it is rarely efficient to use the term in the definition of the term, I prefer the

Wikipedia definition that says the perspective “examines how individuals and groups interact, focusing on the creation of personal identity through interaction with others.” This concept can be better understood in relation to the 1983 comedy “Trading Places.” In the film, Louis Winthorpe III—a wealthy businessman played by Dan Aykroyd—and Billy Ray Valentine—a “wily street con-artist” played by Eddie Murphy—trade occupational and economic statuses. (IMDB) When the two “trade places,” they learn to adapt to their new places and roles in society. Symbolic interactionists say that “behavior is learned” through “interaction with [others].” (Kendall) Therefore, John Landis--the director of the film—would probably fall into this category of sociological belief and explanation as he illustrated that behaviors were learned, and not genetically passed on from parent to child.

All three of these perspectives can be used to explain the tragedy of hurricane Katrina taking and the behaviors of people therein. Each of these sociological viewpoints attempt to extrapolate the constructive (if there are any) and destructive values assigned to and derived from Katrina.

First-of-all, the conflict perspective would say that the poor citizens of New Orleans and the police force sent in to “protect” them are clearly engaged in a power struggle. The poor—representing the Marxist idea of the proletariat—and the police force and military personnel—representing the bourgeoisie—are conflicting because the poor feel mistreated in that they weren’t given proper opportunity to escape the wrath of the hurricane. The police aren’t assisting them to the best of their ability. Instead of helping the people evacuate to safety and salvage whatever severely critical items they can, they are entrapping them within the city of New Orleans in the Superdome. Even now, according to CNN Online, the Superdome may be destroyed and the people may be left stranded. The mayor has ordered “forced evacuation.” (CNN) Conflict theorists would say that this struggle of the poor could also be largely affected by the racist nature of certain governmental organizations. Could it be because the citizens are black?

Second-of-all, the functionalist perspective would say that the hurricane has thrown off the sociological stability and forced the United States into a state of anomie. During that state of chaos, none of the societal structures function in the way in which they were intended.

Functionalists have a difficult time interpreting natural disasters for this reason; they don't tend to have a valid explanation of the current problem other than the vague interpolation of anomie, nor do they offer any type of solution to the underlying problem.

Third-of-all, the symbolic interactionists would interpret Katrina in a similar fashion to the conflict theorists, in that it revolves around the struggle between the so-called government aid, and the poor African-American citizens of New Orleans. However, differing from the conflict theorists, the symbolic interactionists would say that the poor in New Orleans are behaving in the way that they are—refusing to leave the Superdome, and rejecting some federal aid—because of the way that society has treated them in the past. (CNN) That past treatment would act as another barrier to the ones that they already experience because of their race and economic status.

Therefore, all of the sociological perspectives have explanations and offer possible solutions to problems that are present in society, including, but not limited to abortion, gas price inflation, and most recently, hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

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