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# Theories of Clinical Sociology

# Using Sociology to Analyze Human and Organizational Problems: A Humanistic Perspective to Link Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that sociological theory is a major part of the knowledge base needed by sociological practitioners, including both applied and clinical sociologists. Four well-established theories are reviewed to assess their perspectives on social reality, the kinds of problems they would be expected to highlight, and the types of solutions they would be likely to suggest. These are: symbolic interactionism, functionalism or systems theory, exchange theory, and critical theory. It is pointed out that these theories can stimulate sociologists to assess whether their priorities focus on the maintenance of organizational structures or on the fulfillment of human needs.

Current discussions of applied or clinical sociology frequently lead to questions regarding the specific types of skills or knowledge that are marketable among nonacademic employers. Almost inevitably social research skills and statistics

are near the top of this list. General areas of sociological inquiry such as inter-personal relations skills or knowledge of group or organizational dynamics might also be mentioned. At some point in the discussion it might be added that, of course, sociological theory is also important because it provides the intellectual background or knowledge base for applied or clinical work and insures that sociological practitioners will not become "mere technicians."

While some writers have emphasized the importance of theory in a general sense (Giles-Sims and Tuchfeld, 1983; Glass, 1979), others have attempted to elaborate the practical implications of various particular theories (Black and Enos, 1980, 1982; Church, 1985, Cohen, 1981; Enos and Black, 1983; Glassner and Freedman, 1979:59–153; Hurvitz, 1979; Straus, 1984, 1985:4–22; Voelkl and Colburn, 1984). The basic thesis of this paper is that a sound understanding of alternative theories provides considerable flexibility to sociological practi-tioners in terms of the types of problems they can diagnose and potential inter-ventions they can implement.

The place of theory is to provide models of social behavior that will facilitate the identification of human and organizational problems and suggest possible strategies for solution. These models include conceptions or visions of what is normal in social life. Notions of normality do not *necessarily* involve value judgments or moral commitments, nor do they necessarily prevent the analyst from being objective in diagnosing problems or proposing intervention strategies. Instead, they involve abstract efforts to explain typical and important patterns of social life (cf. Glassner and Freedman, 1979:11–20). This is quite different from evaluating social patterns as moral or immoral.

Four well-established theories will be analyzed in terms of: 1) their image of normality in social life; 2) the areas on which their diagnosis of problems would be likely to focus; and 3) the type of intervention strategies they would be likely to suggest. The theories will be reviewed briefly, then typical examples of problems and interventions will be suggested as illustrative.

## Symbolic Interaction Theory

Primarily a microlevel theory, the symbolic interaction model emphasizes the shared world of symbolic meanings that emerge through communication and that mediate people's adaptations to one another and to their environment (Blumer, 1969). Because of their dependence on one another, individuals must take one another's expectations into account and cooperate with one another in meeting their various needs. Even their individual needs are shaped through interaction with others. People are especially sensitive to one another for support for their self-concept (McCall and Simmons, 1978). (See Johnson, 1981:291–341, for a more extensive overview of symbolic interaction theory.)

Part of the image of normal social life is that individuals have sufficient

flexibility to adjust to one another's emergent actions in response to situations they face in common. One of the major implied goals or requirements of social life is to cooperate in achieving a minimal degree of consensus with respect to the definition of the situation. This does not mean that people must have identical goals and values, or that they must always agree completely with one another. It does, however, imply the need for a minimal degree of cognitive congruence in defining the situation, including the relationships of those involved to one another. Achieving this congruence gives people a sense of security and positive reinforcement for one another's identity.

Symbolic interactionists tend not to emphasize large-scale institutional structures. There is the implication, however, that these structures are supported by widely shared definitions that are reinforced throughout a society. If social structures are unsatisfactory, one possible solution is to change people's definitions and expectations. This will result in a change in these arrangements.

What kind of social problems would the symbolic interactionist perspective lead us to identify? One obvious problem would be lack of consensus or clarity in people's definitions of the situation (see Straus, 1984). This may be due either to disagreement or to misunderstanding, and it may apply to the roles individuals develop for themselves, the goals they think should be pursued collectively, or the distribution of resources (money, power, etc.).

Here are some typical examples. A wife tells her husband: "You just don't realize how much work it is having to do all the cooking and housework. It's wearisome. I'd like to have a career, too, and earn some money for myself." (The problem here is wife's perception that husband lacks understanding of her role and her dissatisfaction with this situation.) A social worker tells a colleague: "We're supposed to be providing help to our clients, not just filling out forms all day. You'd think the state's only concern is to have all the paper work complete." (The problem here is lack of clarity on the organization's real priorities, with social workers believing that the state does not really value what they see as their main function.) Examples such as these could be multiplied indefinitely.

The importance of understanding individuals' definitions of the situation applies especially to their definitions of social problems. What is seen as a problem by one group may not be seen as a problem at all by a different group. For example, a wife may view her lack of her own career as a problem while her husband does not. Or, high union wages might be seen as a problem by consumers paying high prices, but not by union members. It is a question of whose definitions will count in defining a social problem.

While symbolic interaction theory does not offer specific substantive solutions to social problems, it does suggest a strategy or a process that can lead to a solution. An important first step is to access the level of inconsistency in people's definitions of the situation. The techniques used in participant obser-

vation research of exploratory interviewing can be useful in uncovering people's various definitions. In a therapy session, for example, it is important to obtain each party's views of what the problem is and how it developed. A low level of consensus is readily apparent when different people describe the same event in terms that are highly incongruent.

In situations of conflict, the role of a clinical sociologist may be that of a mediator who listens to both sides of the dispute and then uses his or her impartial position to explain each side to the other. If successful, the likely outcome is a certain degree of cognitive restructuring, or changing the definitions of the situation of the parties involved (cf. Hurvitz, 1979).

The appropriate intervention strategy for dealing with inconsistent definitions and misunderstandings is to increase the level of communication in a form that encourages constructive interaction and positive feedback. It is important to develop communication mechanisms that are well integrated with ongoing activities, as opposed to being artificially separated from people's normal situations. In addition, sufficient role flexibility is needed so that people can adjust to one another and their common situation in the most pragmatic way possible. The implications of increasing role flexibility in bureaucratic organizations in a complex and changing environment are profound.

As people learn to communicate more effectively, they come to understand one another's divergent perspectives, they take one another's roles more effectively, and they are thus able to integrate their different actions more successfully. This often results in more positive and constructive feedback. The ultimate outcome is not only reinforcement of appropriate role performance but also the creation of a more supportive and satisfying atmosphere.

Increasing communication and mutual understanding does not guarantee agreement, of course. There are situations in which increasing communication or increasing individuals' flexibility may actually exacerbate problems instead of leading to their solution. Lack of communication sometimes prevents unsolvable disagreements from emerging. Nevertheless, if people are experiencing strains or conflicts, effective communication is important as a first step in developing strategies to deal with the problem. At the very least, it is important to distinguish between problems that are due to simple misunderstanding and those that are due to fundamental disagreements or conflicting interests. These types of problems can best be understood in terms of one of the following theories.

**Functional Theory**

The general vision of social life that functionalists or systems theorists share is that patterns of social action form a system that is made up of numerous mutually interdependent parts (or subsystems) (Abrahamson, 1978). To a greater or lesser

degree, the actions of any part are likely to have ramifications, either direct or indirect, on the various other parts or on the system as a whole. These effects (or functions) may be either beneficial or harmful to the overall system or its constituent parts (Merton, 1968).

While functionalists often emphasize shared values as the primary foundation for the cohesion of the parts (Parsons, 1951), the parts may also be integrated through the interdependence that results from a complex division of labor or from the emotional solidarity that follows shared emotional experiences. These are different sources of solidarity, as Durkheim suggests in his contrast between organic solidarity (based on functional interdependence) and mechanical solidarity (based on shared values and emotional cohesion). (See Johnson, 1981:550–557, for a more extensive discussion of these issues.)

The functionalist concept of system may be applied to any type of group or organization within society or to the overall society. The identification of the relevant parts will likewise vary, depending on the size and complexity of the system. But regardless of the type of system, the behavior of its members is analyzed in terms of the roles they play within it and how these roles are related to one another. These roles must be learned through the socialization process. To sustain motivation it is important for individuals to be rewarded appropriately for their participation, either with material or symbolic rewards or both. If the socialization process has been successful, motivation is also sustained by commitment to the values of the system. If the various mechanisms for socializing and motivating individuals are insufficient, social control techniques may be needed to insure people's compliance (Parsons, 1951).

The functionalist version of social life seems particularly relevant in analyzing organizations or groups in which equilibrium, harmony, consensus, emotional solidarity, and stability are seen as important *by the members*. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist emphasis, the implication here is that normative consensus is important *if* it is defined as important by the individuals involved. In a family, for example, it may be disconcerting and frustrating for a spouse in a strained marriage to realize that, after all these years, the couple does not really have many interests in common. Similarly, a church might insist on unanimity of beliefs among its members as the very foundation for its existence. In other types of systems members may take pride in their independence and tolerance of disagreements.

What types of social problems would functionalists be likely to identify? One basic type of problem would be the inability or the unwillingness of individuals to perform their roles in the system. In either case, these deficiencies may result from inadequate socialization. In addition, motivational deficiencies may be due to inadequate rewards for participation or lack of commitment to the values of the system. One common result of failures such as these is deviant behavior. While some types of deviance are disruptive to the system, other types

may be an important source of constructive change, especially when it represents an adaptation to a change in the environment.

Still another type of problem consists of strains in the interrelations of the various parts of the system. In other words, the expectations or actions of the different parts fail to mesh. There may be inadequate coordination between different roles or other subsystems. Or individuals may experience role strain or role overload by having inadequate resources to perform their jobs, or they may be subjected to inconsistent expectations by different persons in different subsystems. An organization may even have conflicting goals, such as, for example, providing services to clients versus cost cutting, each being emphasized differently by different subsystems. Or commitment to established procedures may be so strong that it is difficult to adjust to environmental changes.

The kinds of interventions that might be offered to deal with these problems would depend on the specific character of the problem identified and the type of system. If the problem is inadequate role performance, the solution could lie in improving socialization techniques, improving techniques of social control, or increasing the rewards members receive for their participation in the system. Which of these interventions would be appropriate would depend on whether the problem is lack of expertise or lack of motivation.

Training programs may be recommended to insure adequate levels of knowledge or expertise. The inservice training programs offered by many organizations illustrate this strategy. Lack of commitment can be addressed by improving techniques of social control and motivation. As a general rule, positive reinforcement is generally more effective than negative reinforcement. Thus, for example, it would be preferable to increase pay and other rewards rather than increase surveillance or level of supervision.

In addition, commitment to the basic values of the system can be enhanced through rituals designed to bring members of the system together to celebrate shared achievements. Since Durkheim, sociologists have been sensitive to the importance of rituals in enhancing solidarity. For social systems ranging from families to complex organizations, explicit development of appropriate and meaningful rituals is useful for promoting solidarity and commitment to the values of a system.

If there is disagreement or confusion over what the goals or values of the system are, some type of explicit goal-setting or value-clarification process would seem to be appropriate. Such techniques as management-by-objectives can be effective in developing clarity and consensus on goals, provided that all the persons who will be involved in implementing these goals are involved in the process.

Problems of strain or lack of coordination among the different parts of the system may require such strategies as dividing roles, creating new roles or other subsystems, establishing new communication channels, consolidating roles or

other parts of the system, or various other reorganization interventions. One important general strategy along this line is to improve the feedback mechanisms whereby individuals are able to learn about the effects they are having on other participants in the system or on the environment. For this strategy to result in improvement, however, there must be sufficient flexibility to make adjustments in role performance as needed.

In the final analysis, social systems will probably never exhibit the fine-tuned functional interrelations of a well-crafted machine or a healthy biological organism. This implies that strains and problems will never be eliminated completely. Further, the functionalist image of human nature seems to focus on individuals primarily as "parts" with functions to perform or roles to play within some system. But there are features of human nature that cannot be captured completely in any of our social roles. Thus, the tension between individual needs and desires and the demands of various social systems is likely never to be eliminated. Our next theoretical perspective focuses explicitly on individuals' own goals.

## Exchange Theory

The processes described by these different theories are not independent of each other. For instance, it was mentioned in the last section that individuals must be rewarded for performing their roles as members of social systems. Exchange theory emphasizes explicitly the importance of individual rewards and costs in the shaping of behavior (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1974). Exchange theory, like symbolic interactionism, is primarily a microlevel theory. In general, individuals are seen as attempting to receive maximum benefits (rewards) at the lowest possible cost. This process applies both to material rewards and costs and to nonmaterial social rewards and costs (such as the rewards and costs involved in interaction). (See Johnson, 1981:342–384, for an overview of exchange theory.)

This perspective applies both to personal or primary group relationships as well as to participation in secondary groups or larger organizations. In personal relationships, conscious assessment of individual rewards may be submerged by a genuine concern that each party has for the welfare of the other. But each party also expects that these positive sentiments will be reciprocated. Whether primary or secondary, all relationships are dependent upon the assessments of all parties that their overall reward-cost outcomes are more advantageous than in alternative arrangements.

In spite of the implied emphasis on rationality, we must recognize that a great deal of human behavior involves simply following established routines without continuous conscious calculation of reward-cost outcomes. In areas of life as diverse as our marriages and our occupations, we forego the option of continuing to assess alternatives. Indeed, in personal relationships such as mar-

riage, continual assessment of cost-reward outcomes compared to alternatives would undercut the sincerity of people's attachment to the relationship. The process of rational calculation would seem to apply especially to situations where there is a crisis or breakdown of some type in everyday routines or an unfavorable shift in reward-cost outcomes.

Dissatisfaction with a relationship may lead to renegotiation of the terms of the exchange (either overtly or more subtly) or to withdrawal of the dissatisfied party for a more satisfactory alternative. If there are no alternatives, or if the costs of termination are too high, the typical result is feelings of anger. This may lead to decreasing one's contributions, with the result that the benefits received decline even more. To compound the problem, it is often difficult, especially in personal relationships, to see the dynamics of the relationship objectively because of emotional reactions to the situation.

Problems in relationships often result from imbalance in the exchange process. As Blau (1964) points out, imbalanced exchanges produce power and dependency relationships. A person in a position of dependency is expected to bear the cost of subordination; otherwise the other party, who has supplied benefits on a unilateral basis, may well feel exploited and unappreciated. How often, for example, do parents or employees feel that they are giving much more than they are getting in their particular relationships? Employee burn-out can readily be understood in these terms. As another example, the commitment of some wives to their own careers may reflect a determination not to be completely dependent on their husbands.

In general, the type of intervention that seems appropriate from an exchange theory perspective is to help individuals analyze on a rational basis the costs and rewards of each party in a relationship. Differences in subjective evaluation must, of course, be recognized, especially when we consider that what may be a reward for one person is a cost to another. Beyond this, the next task would be to guide the parties through a process of negotiating and compromising their differences so as to achieve more equitable and satisfying terms of exchange. Behavior contracting is one specific strategy widely used in therapy settings, which is based implicitly on the principles of exchange theory.

In considering the kinds of compromises that might be proposed, it is important to determine whether the relationship fits the model of a zero-sum game or not. In zero-sum games, there are only so many benefits (so much money, for instance) to be allocated. Thus, it is inevitable that one person's gain is the other party's loss. Compromise in such situations inevitably results in all parties getting less than they might desire. Economic transactions that involve material exchanges often fit this pattern. This type of situation will be dealt with in more detail in the next section on critical theory.

The social exchanges in many personal relationships do not fit the zero-sum model, however. Instead, the total amount of benefits can be expanded.

This is the type of situation which in game theory is clearly considered a win-win situation. Compromise may involve all parties giving more, but as they give more they also get more. To use an economic analogy, as investments increase profits also increase. For example, what is the limit on the love that two people can give to each other or the mutual acceptance and emotional support that members of a close-knit circle of friends can provide one another?

One reason why the supply of these various social rewards may seem in short supply is that the parties involved have gradually lost faith in one another. They do not give of themselves in ways that would be rewarding because they do not expect the other party to reciprocate. Part of the challenge in such situations is to help the parties involved reestablish faith in one another. This would lead them to give more to one another, and the result would be increased benefits and satisfaction for both. Again, explicit behavior contracting may be useful in providing a specific and manageable opportunity for each party to demonstrate his or her trustworthiness.

## Critical Theory

As used here, critical theory is a generic term that includes several specific theoretical perspectives, including Marxism and neo-Marxism of various types (see Becker and Horowitz, 1973; Connerton, 1976). All of these perspectives involve a critical stance toward the existing social order and a strong commitment to human liberation. Many critical theories emphasize the processes of conflict and change (in contrast to the functionalist emphasis on harmony and stability). (See Johnson, 1981:447–506, for a more extensive overview of these issues.) However, the absence of conflict is not taken to imply harmonious consensus. More than likely, the appearance of harmony indicates some form of "false consciousness" or lack of awareness of alternatives, or it may indicate fear of overt reprisal.

In general, the image of social life implied in most versions of critical theory is that most if not all social systems are repressive and exploitative to a greater or lesser degree. Critical theorists differ in terms of whether their primary focus is the economic structure (as it was for Marx), the political power structure, or the various structures through which our world views and consciousness are formed. Whatever the specific focus, inequalities in the distribution of scarce resources is a major source of strain and discontent. Critical theorists are especially interested in demonstrating how the sociopolitical status quo benefits those in power while repressing the majority of the population to some extent and the lowest classes of society to an extreme degree.

How can social systems based on inequality, repression, and exploitation survive? There are numerous types of techniques that serve to stifle protest and encourage acceptance of the status quo, both direct (expressed through the police

power of the state) and indirect (expressed through various subtle indoctrination mechanisms). These techniques may be intended or unintended, and they may make abundant use of individuals' desires to promote their own self-interests. For example, the promise of upward mobility may inspire people to devote their lives to careers in which they are exploited. Specific techniques of control may include cooptation of dissenting groups or potential dissenters, diversion of people's attention through creation of pseudo-issues or through escapist forms of entertainment, physical coercion or its threat, giving and withholding of various types of rewards (including both money and social approval), and shaping people's world view through the educational system and the mass media.

On a more abstract level, many critical theorists are sensitive to the internal contradictions of social systems. Conflict between classes is only one example of such contradictions. There are also contradictions between opposing values and principles of organization within the system, and the typical response to such contradictions is to try to cover them up or postpone having to deal with them. In the area of race relations, for example, the expressed goal of eliminating discrimination contradicts the goal of rewarding seniority in organizations in which most of the old-timers are white. This leads to the charge of reverse discrimination versus the charge of institutional racism.

Critical theory often deals with the overall society, but the same goals and logic could be applied to any type of social system. Power relations in families, for example, have recently come to be recognized as an important dimension of family dynamics. Almost all social systems have some form of stratification system or power structure, and most can be subjected to the kind of criticism in which subordinates are seen as repressed and exploited to varying degrees.

Critical theorists' diagnosis of problems would tend to focus on the structure of the system, especially inequalities in the distribution of rewards and resources. Further, individuals' lack of expressed dissatisfaction would not be taken as an indication of the absence of social strains or problems. Individuals may not express dissatisfaction because they are not aware of alternatives or because they are resigned to their situation. Thus, critical theorists would seek to uncover hidden strains and frustrations, many of which lead to psychological withdrawal, as well as to analyze the problems of which people are acutely aware.

An initial step in problem analysis is to examine whether or not individuals are aware of their "class interests" (i.e., the material interests that they share with others at the same level). A closely related question is whether or not conflict issues are recognized by those in positions of power and authority as well as by subordinates. As we saw earlier, some groups or organizations emphasize internal consensus so strongly that they stifle conflict. Yet, a certain degree of conflict is inevitable in social life, even in groups that are generally cohesive. Thus, it is important to determine whether or not there are explicit

procedures for recognizing and dealing with conflict when it does surface.

The intervention strategies that critical theorists might offer for the problems they identify vary from the radical to more moderate solutions. The specific strategies that are realistic will vary, depending upon the specific situation, especially whether the system is micro- or macrolevel. In complex organizations, for example, it might be possible to improve opportunities of individuals for upward mobility within the system. Such policies as promotion from within may reflect this strategy. However, if the organization is not expanding and turnover rates at higher levels are low, this strategy may not be feasible. Even when upward mobility is possible, there is a risk that this procedure could be counterproductive because it may inflate expectations for promotion unrealistically, and it may eventually leave the less competent persons at the lower levels.

Other intervention strategies include changing the distribution of rewards so as to reduce inequality and establishing specific mechanisms for the expression and negotiation of conflict issues. In macrolevel systems, both of these strategies may require some explicit effort to mobilize and organize persons who share similar interests. The history of labor unions in American industry illustrates these strategies. Even when it is not realistic to expect substantial improvements in the distribution of material resources it is still useful to have explicit procedures to deal with conflict, whether it involves material rewards or other issues.

Establishment of procedures to negotiate conflict issues is also important in families or other groups in which emotional bonds are strong (see Coser, 1956). As noted earlier, conflict issues may not even be seen as legitimate in groups in which consensus and emotional solidarity are expected to be strong. In this type of situation, the clinical sociologist as counselor can help members develop explicit procedures for dealing with their differences and conflicts in a rational and constructive way. This may mean, for example, helping parents develop opportunities for their children to express their disagreements without fear of being criticized or put down.

One potential shortcoming of critical theory is that the emphasis on liberation of individuals from repressive social structures may lead to neglect of the exigencies and the constraints of social organization. Thus, while functional theory seemed to downgrade human beings to the status of functionaries in social systems, critical theory seems to downgrade patterns of social organization to arbitrary constraints on human beings' freedom that are devised for the benefit of the few.

## Human versus Organizational Problems: A Question of Priorities

The theories we have examined are consistent in the emphasis on communication that is implied by each. Nevertheless, their differing models of social life imply

different types of challenges for intervention. These differences may be summarized briefly as follows:

1. Symbolic interaction: challenge of increasing mutual understanding and achieving minimal consensus in definitions of the situation
2. Functionalism: challenge of developing clarity and consensus with respect to shared values and goals and of insuring commitment and coordination
3. Exchange theory: challenge of insuring that cost-reward outcomes are perceived as fair
4. Critical theory: challenge of empowering subordinants and of recognizing conflicting interests and developing mechanisms to deal with them

Overall, the theories we have reviewed seem to differ in terms of whether they emphasize primarily human needs or the requirements of social organization. Exchange theory and critical theory give priority to human needs and their fulfillment, while functional theory stresses the requirements of social organization. Symbolic interaction theory stresses the necessity for people's mutual adjustment to one another as they attempt to meet their various needs, with organizational or institutional structures forming the backdrop for this process.

Even though sociology may be considered a humanistic enterprise by those committed to the fulfillment of human needs and aspirations, the general vision of social life that it promotes sometimes seems to give priority to the way in which individuals are shaped and constrained to fit in to the demands and requirements of organized social life. These demands and requirements may or may not be seen as just and appropriate, but they are part of the social reality to which individuals must adapt, and they are a large part of the subject matter of sociology.

Sociological practitioners must face the issue of priorities in terms of their own career commitments. Organizational effectiveness is not the same as individual fulfillment or happiness. Which of these goals should have priority in the work of applied or clinical sociologists? Can a balance be struck between them? Or is it necessary to choose one or the other?

At the very least, it is important to remember that people's motivations for meeting organizational demands are going to be energized to the extent that they are also able to meet their own basic needs within the context of the organization (Gutknecht, 1984). If human needs are given priority, as they are explicitly in critical theory (Mills, 1959) and in clinical sociology (Lee, 1978), the problem of social organization is actually a technical problem of how to fit individuals' motivations and actions together to accomplish some collective purpose. Understanding these theoretical issues is essential for sorting through the dilemmas that practitioners face in developing effective problem-solving strategies.

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