

**CRITIQUING AND EXPANDING THE SOCIOLOGY OF
INEQUALITY: COMPARING FUNCTIONALIST, CONFLICT, AND
INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVES**

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ABSTRACT

Many sociologists appear to assume that there are only two broad approaches to the study of inequality: functionalism and conflict theory. Textbooks on introductory sociology and social stratification frequently compare the two theoretical camps by distilling and juxtaposing their contradictory premises. In this article, I argue that a third alternative, symbolic interactionism, can make a distinctive contribution to the field of stratification and inequality. By extrapolating from and building on Blumer's fundamental principles of interactionism, I articulate the basic features of this neglected viewpoint and compare it to the general orientations of functionalism and conflict theory.

CRITIQUING AND EXPANDING THE SOCIOLOGY OF INEQUALITY: COMPARING FUNCTIONALIST, CONFLICT, AND INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVES

The conventional wisdom in sociology, at least as expressed in the discipline's textbooks, is that there are only two major approaches to the study of inequality: functionalism and conflict theory (Kerbo 1991, p. 92; Shapiro 1998, pp. 29-30). In books that provide an introduction to the field of sociology, it is not uncommon to see these two theoretical camps explicitly defined and differentiated (Anderson and Taylor 2001, p. 176; Macionis 2001, pp. 257-8; Thio 1986, p. 212; Tischler 2002, p. 207). Usually, functionalism serves as the weaker counterpart to more powerful conflict explanations of why inequality exists in society and what consequences it has. In other chapters of the same introductory texts, however, symbolic interactionism is listed as a major sociological perspective. When the topic switches to deviance, family, or the self, interactionism is much more likely to be presented as a distinct alternative to functionalism and conflict theory. But in the chapters specifically devoted to inequality, interactionism frequently disappears or is given short thrift (e.g., Macionis 2001).

In this article, I take issue with the conventional sociological wisdom that there are only two broad approaches to inequality. I argue that interactionism is a distinguishable and potentially enlightening option to functionalism and conflict

theory. In order to clarify this option, I compare its guiding principles with those that summarize and guide functionalist and conflict research on inequality. By extrapolating from and building on Blumer's (1969) fundamental premises of interactionism, I articulate the special contribution interactionism can make to the study of inequality.

FUNCTIONALIST AND CONFLICT PERSPECTIVES ON INEQUALITY

The wealth of literature that comprises the sociology of inequality is huge and complex; any synopsis and analysis would be a highly selective and interpretive feat. Nevertheless, many sociologists—myself included—often find it useful to try to distill the key points of certain segments of that literature in order to try to summarize work that has been done and to shape future research. A third reason, of course, is to attempt to explain “the field” to students and other newcomers, as textbooks do.

In this section of my paper I draw heavily on Anderson and Taylor's (2001) well-crafted text on introductory sociology, as well as Davis and Moore's (1945) influential original statement of the functionalist approach and Tumin's (1953) famous conflict critique, in order to present pared-down versions of functionalist and conflict perspectives on inequality. I limit my portrayals of these two camps to six main points each, presented in two separate tables, in order to make my comparison with interactionism more clear and manageable. The first table summarizes the functionalist perspective.

Table 1: Functionalism on Inequality
(Adapted from Davis and Moore 1945; Tumin 1953)

1. Society is an organic system whose various components work together to contribute to the health of the system. Some of the positions within the system, though, are more important than others for the survival of the society.
2. For a society to remain healthy, the most functionally important positions must be filled by the most qualified people. However, the number of people with the talent and/or the training to fill these roles is limited.
3. Individuals must be induced to spend the time, effort, and financial resources that training requires.
4. Consequently, society allocates greater rewards to those positions that are more important and require scarce talents.
5. Inequality is an unconsciously established system through which societies fill the most crucial positions with the most skilled persons.
6. Some degree of inequality is inevitable because it contributes positively to the functioning of societies.

Functionalism relies on the metaphor that society is a body or a living system (Rigney 2001, p. 17). Just as a human organism consists of many parts (e.g., brain, heart, stomach) working together for the survival of the person, so too does society consist of multiple cooperative components. Functional analysis proceeds not by examining the details of specific interactions but by looking at the society as a whole and determining how it maintains itself. If some institution or pattern exists, these analysts assume it probably serves some good purpose.

When functionalists consider the ubiquity of social deviance, for example, they note the positive role that inappropriate behavior plays in maintaining the health of societies. By prompting outrage in others, the deviant can clarify and reinforce social norms while strengthening a group's sense of community¹.

When functionalists Davis and Moore (1945) turn to the topic of inequality, the same sort of analysis occurs. These authors focus on occupational stratification and wonder why it is that all societies tend to give unequal rewards (e.g., income and prestige) to the different positions that comprise its social structure. In modern terms, why do doctors, judges, and computer scientists make more money and receive more respect than garbage collectors and migrant farm workers? Their answer is that some positions are more important to the survival of the society than others are. These positions require much talent and education. However, the pool of potential position holders is limited, and individuals must be encouraged to acquire the training and develop the capabilities that are needed. Higher levels of rewards are thus given to those occupations (e.g., in medicine or law) that require a large investment of time and effort. Hierarchical arrangements, then, are "unconsciously evolved" systems by which a society fills its most important jobs with the most capable people (Davis and Moore 1945).

In contrast to functionalism's somewhat benign organismic viewpoint, conflict theory adopts the metaphor "society as war." From this perspective, the social realm is "a figurative battlefield upon which contending social factions

¹ Not every part of society is said to be functional, however. Sometimes functionalists explain deviance and other social problems as the result of a structural strain that results when two (or more) of society's parts become mis-aligned (e.g., Ogburn 1957).

struggle for control of scarce resources such as wealth and power” (Rigney 2001, p. 67). Whereas functionalists look for different functional components, conflict theorists look for competing interest groups, exploitation, and struggle. Class, race, and gender are the principal factors that shape “who gets what,” not the unconscious operation of a harmonious social system. Accordingly, conflict theorists’ divergent metaphor leads them to criticize Davis and Moore’s formulation on many counts. Unequal wages, conflict theorists argue, may have more to do with elites dominating their workers than with talent, training, or functional importance. Or, a conflict theorist might highlight the fact that some people may earn more money primarily because they were born white or male or upper class.

Table 2: Conflict Theory on Inequality
(Adapted from Anderson and Taylor 2001, p. 176)

1. Different groups struggle over societal resources and compete for social advantages. Classes exist in conflict with each other as they vie for power and economic, social, and political resources.
2. Inequality results from a system of domination and subordination where those with the most resources exploit and control others.
3. The most powerful use their resources to reproduce their position and advantages. Elites shape societal beliefs and laws to make their unequal privilege seem legitimate and fair.
4. There is blocked mobility in the system because the working class and poor are denied the same opportunities as others.
5. The most vital jobs in society—those that sustain life and the quality of life—are often the least rewarded.

6. Inequality prevents the talents of those at the bottom from being discovered and used. Hence, the more stratified a society, the less likely that society will benefit from the talents of all its citizens.

I think it is safe to say that for the past few decades conflict theory has been the main perspective sociologists use when researching and theorizing about social inequality. Inequalities of class, race, and gender are most often analyzed as unnecessary, unfair, and/or exploitive relations between rival groups in society. Although some might question how much positive social reform has come from all this research (Cancian 1995), few would deny that inequality has become one of the central organizing themes of the discipline and that conflict theory is sociologists' perspective of choice (Kerbo 1991; Shapiro 1998).

INTERACTIONISM AND INEQUALITY

Functionalism and conflict theory appear to be diametrically opposed. One's guiding imagery assumes cooperative interdependence among society's parts; the other's metaphor assumes the parts are in heated battle. The two perspectives make different fundamental assumptions and arrive at differing sets of conclusions. Despite their differences, though, some important commonalities can be found. Specifically, both functionalists and conflict theories take it for granted (1) that inequality exists as an objective entity "out there" in society and (2) that it is primarily *their* prerogative to define, identify, and explain it. An interactionist perspective, I argue, would contradict the other camps on both of

these points. Interactionism gives priority to the diverse meanings that things (such as “inequality”) have *for everyday people* and assumes that people bring those objects into existence through their *interpretive* practices. As a result, this perspective tends to set aside many of the issues that concern functionalists and conflict theorists. Instead, attention is focused on more basic and (arguably) prior issues, such as how “equal” and “unequal” states of affairs come to be defined, explained, and acted toward as consequential features of various social worlds.

Table 3: Interactionism on Inequality
(Adapted from Harris 2001; Blumer 1969)

1. Society is human beings interacting.
2. Human beings act based on the meanings that things have for them.
3. Nothing is inherently equal or unequal.
4. People act based on their interpretations of inequality, *if and when* the issue is a relevant concern to them.
5. Equal and unequal situations are defined as such during the course of interaction.
6. The meaning of inequality is handled through an active, interpretive process. Terms such as “inequality” and “unequal” are conceptual resources that people use creatively to make sense of the world around them.

The first two points of table 3 are meant to capture the gist of interactionism’s view of society (Blumer 1969). Interactionism adopts a more

minimalist imagery—“society as symbolic interaction”—than functionalism’s “society as a body” and conflict theory’s “society as war” metaphors. By orienting to its field of inquiry as meaningful social conduct, symbolic interactionists tend to leave themselves more open to discovery (Blumer 1969, pp. 53-4). They have not colored the landscape from the outset as already body-like or war-like. They are thus in a somewhat better position to investigate, rather than assume, what the world looks like to people who are actually living it². Is a particular situation harmonious, war-like, or neither? Is it equal, unequal, or something else? Interactionism puts *people’s* answers to these questions before analysts’.

Though it puts a heavy emphasis on interpretive variability, interactionism does not assert that “anything goes.” The perspective recognizes that people cannot interpret reality any way they want—that the physical and social world out there is somewhat obdurate. (I can try to treat my desk as an airplane, but it probably won’t fly and others may shun me.) Nevertheless, interactionism does suggest that the most basic place to begin learning about people is to study how they define their own situations, even if those understandings seem strange or unrealistic. The stories that people live by, interactionism holds, deserve at least as much attention as the various scholarly tales that can be found in sociological books and articles. In short, the meanings things have *for everyday people* are central and should not be ignored (Blumer 1969, pp. 2-3).

The third point in table 3 may sound controversial to some. However, it reflects one of the most longstanding and influential tenets of interactionism: the

² In addition, interactionists are usually aware that their guiding metaphor also applies to their own research. This makes them more conscious of how they are impacting the “findings” that they create through their own interpretive methodological practices.

idea that the meaning of things is not inherent. This counter-intuitive notion arises repeatedly in Blumer's (1969) agenda-setting book, and is crucial to understanding his thinking. For Blumer, human beings live in worlds of objects whose exact nature is not innate³. "Instead of the individual being surrounded by an environment of pre-existing objects which play upon him and call forth his behavior, the proper picture is that he constructs his objects on the basis of his on-going activity" (Blumer 1969, p. 80). This one premise has informed and inspired a great deal of interactionist research. Over the past several decades interactionists have studied how potentially troubling situations can be designated as many different kinds of social problems or as not problematic at all (Blumer 1971; Loseke 1999); how bad behavior is deviant not by design but by definition (Becker 1973; Goode 1994); and how identity is shaped through the way a person is labeled and acted towards by others and by the individual him- or herself (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Mead 1934).

The statement that "nothing is inherently equal or unequal" thus reflects a signature feature of the interactionist perspective, the idea that the meaning of things *in general* is not inherent. Friendships, marriages, ethnic groups, economic conditions—these do not come with the label "equal" or "unequal" already attached. Reality is indeterminate, massive, and complex; consequently, any characterization of a given situation as equal or unequal will be a selective and interpretive accomplishment. For example, describing the difference between a \$50,000 annual salary and a \$25,000 salary as a serious inequality

³ For Blumer, objects are anything people can refer to.

may seem bizarre from the perspective of someone who is homeless and hungry, or from the perspective of certain religious groups who view economic matters as trivial compared to spiritual or otherworldly concerns. Or consider how some conservatives might view a traditional nuclear family as highly effective and adaptive, while a contemporary conflict scholar might argue that the arrangement is thoroughly unequal. The fact that sociologists who teach about inequality sometimes encounter opposition from their students can also be seen as evidence of divergent perspectives on inequality, even though some viewpoints may be more carefully conceived and documented than others.

For an interactionist, however, the point of invoking the idea that “meaning is not inherent” is not to argue with the claims made by lay persons, functionalists, or conflict theorists—e.g., claims that there is (or is not) an “occupational hierarchical structure” with particular causes and effects. Rather, the main purpose is to encourage researchers *to investigate* the different inequality objects that may exist in diverse social worlds, as well as the contingent interpretive processes that bring those experienced objects into existence. Another way to put it is that functionalist and conflict theorists tend to do third-person sociology. They try to construct an overarching story about “what’s really going on out there” with respect to inequality. Interactionism, in contrast, fosters a more first-person sociology. It asks, what are the inequalities that different individuals and groups delineate? How are these inequalities seen and experienced from their perspectives? What do *they* think is going on?

The reason for asking those kinds of question is reflected in the fourth statement in table 3. This premise extrapolates from the interactionist assumption that human beings' behavior is informed by the interpretations that they make, but adds an important caveat related to the issue of inequality. That is, interactionism does hold that people act based on their own definitions of "equal" and "unequal" situations; however, just because inequality has become a central theme of sociological research, it does not follow that everyday people are as interested in the issue as scholars are. The methodological implication, then, is to inquire *whether* inequality is a relevant concern for the person or group under study. If it is, one can proceed to other interpretive matters, such as discovering which form (or forms) of inequality members pay attention to⁴. Are they interested in economics? race? gender? intelligence? beauty? athletic prowess? How do they measure the differences? What constitutes a serious inequality, and what qualifies as "close enough" to be considered equal? Which examples do they highlight, and which do they try to discount?

The criticism that may arise here is that an interactionist approach is promoting a naïve and individualistic view of inequality. The complaint may be: "You're arguing that inequality is relevant only when some social actor thinks it is. But what if the person is too ignorant or misguided to correctly see the inequality that surrounds him or her?" My reply to this is to admit that sociologists and other outside observers may in fact identify "objective" inequalities that a

⁴ For example, traditional researchers who study marital inequality frequently make it their prerogative to decide whether to study "power," "the division of labor," "overall equity," or some other issue. In contrast, in my research I allowed my respondents to tell me which form of inequality was relevant in their marriages (Harris 2001).

participant of an interaction is oblivious to. Scholars have and (undoubtedly) will continue to tell useful and compelling stories about social inequalities, perhaps encouraging certain segments of society to recognize their own exploitation⁵. Nevertheless, those so-called objective inequalities are not inherent; they are also “worked up” or “talked into being” by the outside observers (see Blumer 1969, p. 69; Heritage 1984, p. 290). Moreover, I would add that neither everyday nor sociological understandings of inequality are individualistic creations. Both are *social constructions*, with all the nuances and implications associated with that phrase (especially as it is used by Gubrium and Holstein [1997], Loseke [1999], and Potter [1996]). Both sociological and lay accounts of inequality are built out of larger cultural and material resources, within particular social settings, in collaboration and conflict with others, to accomplish particular interactive agendas. I say this not to dismiss sociological accounts of inequality, but to dignify lay accounts as important and instructive in their own right.

The fourth and fifth points in table 3 highlight the social dimensions of meaning-making without succumbing to a sociological determinism. Yes, individuals are socialized to perspectives, including perspectives on inequality; yes, there are culturally approved ways of thinking and doing that group members must conform to. After all, people must be taught that some “races” are supposedly better than others, or that wealth is a sign of superiority rather than sin or luck. But there is still considerable free play and idiosyncrasy in social interaction. Meanings are not merely applied; they are actively used and

⁵ But there will always be a tension between benevolent consciousness-raising and cultural imperialism—something that an interactionist reformer would keep at the forefront of his or her mind.

revised (Blumer 1969, p. 5). For example, much ambiguity surrounds sentiments such as “All good marriages ...are equal marriages” (Stapleton and Bright 1976, p. 14; see also Harris 2001) or beliefs that close friends should treat each other as equals (see Harris 1997). It takes a great deal of interpretive work to compare these cultural maxims with the detailed complexity of reality and determine exactly how equal or unequal a particular situation is. As with storytelling more generally (Gubrium and Holstein 1998), sometimes individuals exhibit extreme self-consciousness about the meanings they are creating: they may explicitly doubt what they are saying, acknowledge other ways of seeing things, change their minds, or make similar interactional moves that show (among other things) that they are not slaves to a particular orientation. Accordingly, someone may initially claim to have an unequal marriage, but in the next instant add that he or she “might be biased” or that the relationship is “really not so bad” once something else is taken into account. In short, people are not cultural dopes (Garfinkel 1967), even when it comes to the issue of inequality.

DISCUSSION

By alternating back and forth between tables 1, 2, and 3, readers should be able to appreciate the contrast that I am trying to make. Functionalism and conflict theory, competitors though they may be, both tend to assume that there is “a” system or structure of inequality out there. Both assume that virtually all of society is operating within this arrangement, and that it is their job to identify and

explain “it.” Symbolic interactionism, in contrast, assumes that inequalities are diverse and tenuous objects that people bring into and out of existence in the course of social interaction. For interactionism, inequality is not “out there” as an independent, self-subsistent entity or system; rather, its identification is an interpretive accomplishment. The perceived existence and nature of inequality is thoroughly dependent on people creatively relating that loose concept to the intricate complexities of their personal lives and the political issues of the day (see Condit and Lucaites 1993; Harris 2001).

Another important contrast between the tables has to do with their different scope. Much of the functionalist/conflict debate has grown out of and hinged upon Davis and Moore’s (1945) controversial paper. That article, however, centered on one kind of inequality: occupational stratification. As a result, the main points of these perspectives (as they are listed here and in sociology textbooks) tend to remain tied to the issues of income and occupational prestige. The table I have constructed for interactionism is different in that I have formulated it with reference to all kinds of inequality: occupational, marital, political, intellectual, environmental, and so on. Upon comparing the tables, functionalists, conflict theorists, and textbook authors might ask themselves, “Why aren’t the main points articulated in the first two tables more widely applicable? Could we make them so?” If those scholars are interested in summarizing and developing general orientations to inequality, it seems that some revision may be in order.

As should be evident by now, I believe that constructing and comparing even simplistic tables such as these can be a helpful exercise. Distinguishing contradictory assumptions and distilling the key points of different “camps” can help sociologists assess what they have done and where they are going, in addition to clarifying the field for students⁶. A particularly useful strategy may be to continually move back and forth between basic overviews and intricate studies, so that each informs the other. Just as the three simplistic tables I have presented in this article can be made more problematic and complex by comparing them to actual sociological work, researchers who consult such tables may be prompted to pursue different lines of inquiry. Researchers could ask themselves, “Which analytical approach do I tend to take? What would be the result if I attempted to include seemingly contradictory tools or if I focused more exclusively on one set of tools?”

In my own research, I have taken the latter route and have focused on developing interactionism’s distinctive contribution by combining it only with concepts from theoretical traditions that share its heavy emphasis on interpretation, such as phenomenology (Schutz 1964), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984), and narrative analysis (Maines 1993; Gubrium

⁶ It is worth emphasizing that the kinds of tables I present here are simplified versions of actual practice. When you leave the tables and textbooks behind and turn to actual research, things are much more complicated. A single sociologist may employ many seemingly “contradictory” analytical tools in the course of completing a single project. For example, Hochschild’s (1989) impressive book *The Second Shift* draws on conflict ideas about gender inequality, functionalist ideas about cultural lags, and interactionist ideas about the negotiation of meaning. She views inequality in marriage as an outcome of exploitive relations between husbands and wives, as a consequence of uneven rates of change among various components of a cultural system (i.e., the workforce has changed but workplaces and men have not), and as a matter of interpretation (e.g., a husband’s perception of fairness depends on whether he compares his contribution to housework with what his wife does or with what other husbands do in their marriages).

and Holstein 1997). In contrast, when I look at most interactionist research on inequality (Horowitz 1997; Schwalbe et al. 2000), I find that these scholars have prematurely combined their perspective with more functionalist or (especially) conflict orientations that conceive of inequality as an objective condition. While these interactionists regularly highlight the importance of meaning, interaction, and the qualitative investigation of everyday life, they still assume that inequality exists objectively and that it is primarily their job, rather than the job of those they study, to define inequality and identify its manifestations (e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000, p. 421). Consequently, interactionists have failed to push their perspective to its conceptual limits in order to develop its special strengths: an acute sensitivity to the diverse meanings inequality may have and the interpretive methods people use to create those meanings. As a result, there is no significant tradition of work on the social construction of inequality like there is for social problems (Loseke 1999) or the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

I hope this article encourages at least a few sociologists to challenge the conventional wisdom and try to remedy that neglect. As it is currently practiced and presented in textbooks, the sociology of inequality remains limited by its own reifications. As a result, it obscures many experienced “truths” and distorts others. Scholars who are confident that inequality exists objectively (and that they know exactly what “it” is) are not likely to investigate the variety of subjective meanings the concept might acquire through its everyday

usage in diverse social contexts. I think a social science that aims to understand people could devote more of its energies to respecting and studying the meanings that they live by.

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