

Conflict Theory:

Conflict theorists, like structural functionalists, view social reality in terms of social structures: parts making up a social whole. Such a view of the social world includes an understanding that social facts exist, and this is true of conflict theory as much as it is true of structural functionalism. Common ground notwithstanding, conflict theory and structural functionalism are also dramatically different in one important way. When conflict theorists view a social structure they do not see interrelated parts necessarily working together for the good of the whole. While the parts may indeed be interrelated, existent role behavior cannot be characterized as selfless cooperation.

From a conflict perspective, such thinking about social life is Pollyannaish and unrealistic. Struggle trumps cooperation. Rather than viewing a social structure as being made up of cooperating parts, conflict theorists view a social structure as being made up of competing parts. Hence, the most pertinent question is not what does an individual do for the good of the whole, but how will that individual's role eventually serve his/ her own interests.

Consider the example of the university. When students pay tuition are they being thankful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the ongoing maintenance of the entire university? Are they making this tuition contribution out of pure goodness or perhaps as an act of charity? For the most part, albeit not entirely, the appropriate answer is probably "no" in both instances. People attending the university expect to get something in return. Students are not offering tuition as a contribution to the good of the whole. When conflict theorists look at the university they see continuous struggle. Students are often struggling with faculty members to get the grades that they want. Faculty members are sometimes struggling with students to win their compliance in remembering the information they believe is important.

Faculty members are struggling with the administrators to attain the resources they believe they need to adequately maintain their programs and teach the courses that need to be taught. Administrators are struggling with faculty members to accept lower pay than faculty members believe they deserve, and there are other related conflicts within the university. Additionally the university is in continuous struggle with external agents. Administrators within a state university must lobby state politicians to attain the resources they need to keep the university operating at a sufficiently high level of performance. Administrators within a private university must be in continual contact with private donors in their efforts to convince them to give more money to the university, which sometimes involves important educational compromises.

The haves and have-nots:

From a conflict theory perspective the world is made up of those who have a lot of

resources and those who have far fewer resources. Those who do not have many resources are behaving in ways that they hope will give them access to the resources of others. People who do have resources, however, are typically not satisfied to simply keep the resources they have, but want more. The struggle becomes complicated because those who have many resources oftentimes are finding ways of getting still more resources from those who have little, as well as from others that also have a lot of resources. Karl Marx, the founder of conflict theory, and his co-author Frederick Engels, saw the industrial revolution as a way for wealthy people to use their resources to gain still more resources from the labor of poor people (Marx and Engels 1969). The early writings of Karl Marx portray the industrial worker as a person being alienated from meaningful life sustaining activities that contribute to the well-being of the worker as a total person (Marx 2008). Contemporary conflict theorists do not believe that the industrial revolution marked either the beginning or the end of the struggle between the wealthy and the poor. According to conflict theorists, the struggle between the haves and have-nots continues to this day and permeates all aspects of social life.

John C. Alessio (2013-01-28). *Social Problems and Inequality (Solving Social Problems)* (Kindle Locations 614-618). Ashgate. Kindle Edition.