Three Perspectives of Sociology/
The Social Construction of Reality

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Conflict perspective

✓ Emphasizes how social order arises from dominance and coercion
✓ Society viewed as struggle between “haves” and “have-nots”
✓ Marx focused on economic “haves” and “have-nots” (class struggle)
✓ Current conflict theorists also interested in other sources of conflict (e.g., gender and race)
✓ Main focus on how society affects people, especially stratification

Karl Marx
Symbolic interactionism

- Society viewed as ongoing interaction using symbols
- Unlike other perspectives, focus is micro/interactional level, not social structure
- Social order is possible because of shared meanings
- Shared meanings arise from interaction and interpretation
- More than other perspectives, studies how people construct social reality

George H. Mead
Social construction of reality

✓ Social construction of reality (Newman): process through which the members of a society discover, make known, reaffirm, and alter a collective version of facts, knowledge, and “truth” (p. 56)

✓ Social construction of reality (Schweingruber): process through which people attach meanings to things and then act on the basis of those meanings (sometimes forgetting they are the source of those meanings)

✓ We live in two worlds, the physical world and the world of meanings

✓ Three steps in attaching meanings to things:
  • Categorizing: dividing up physical world into parts
  • Naming: Attaching symbols (‘X’) to those parts
  • Typifying: Characterizing what a typical ‘X’ is like

✓ People act toward things based on the meanings attached to them

✓ Conflict theorists focus on how some people have more power to give meanings than others


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Age 3: cup, little cup, big cup, coffee cup, paper cup
Age 12: cup, glass, fruit cup, wine glass, juice glass, Dixie cup, measuring cup, mug, beer mug, etc.
Some socially constructed categories

- Colors (number of colors in languages varies from 2-12)
- Animals: food, pets, endangered, vermin
- Time: weeks, linear, cyclical, clock time, time as commodity
- Races: white, black, Asian, American Indian, etc.
- Sexes: man, woman, etc.
- Moral/legal/medical labels: Juvenile delinquent, gifted, felon, sexual predator, mentally ill, sinner, pardoned
- Social problems (e.g., domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, acquaintance rape)