Three Perspectives of Sociology

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Structural-functionalist perspective

- Emphasizes how society is structured to maintain stability
- Society compared to organism
- Emphasizes society’s effect on individuals
- Early study: Emile Durkheim’s *Suicide*

Emile Durkheim
Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1897)

- Most studies of suicide focus on individual characteristics
- Durkheim studied connections between individuals and society
- Findings:
  - Higher rates for widowed, single and divorced than married
  - Higher rates for people without children than with children
  - Higher among Protestants than Catholics
- Conclusion: suicide may be caused by weak social ties
  - He called this egoistic suicide
- Why? Society gives meaning to life so detachment from society (weak social ties) results in low value given to human existence
- But too strong social ties can also result in altruistic suicide
- Durkheim also argued that suicide can result from lack of regulation in a capitalist society
  - He called this anomic suicide

Emile Durkheim
Robert Merton’s functions

✔ Parts of society exist because they have functions
✔ Robert Merton’s three types of functions:
  • Manifest functions: intended, obvious consequences of activities designed to help some part of the social system (p. 33)
  • Latent functions: unintended, unrecognized consequences of activities that help some part of the social system (p. 33)
  • Dysfunctions: consequences of activities that are harmful to some part of the social system
✔ A major task of sociology is to discover latent functions
Latent functions of CPR

1. Takes some suddenness of sudden death away
2. Fosters sense of interpersonal solidarity
3. Opportunity for friends and relatives of deceased person to talk to social worker or chaplain
4. Allows relatives to conclude that everything medically possible has been done to revive their loved one

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