

*Florida SouthWestern State College*  
*General Education Assessment*  
*CREATIVE Competency: Visualize*  
*Exemplar Assignment*  
*Submission from Principles of Sociology*

## **Summary of Three Sociological Perspectives**

As we learned in class the different sociological perspectives help us to think about and ask about things from different perspectives. Each of the three perspective emphasizes something different and is the focus of that particular perspective. In this document I will review some basic information we have learned in class and give you some tips that might to help you with the assignment.

### **Structural Functionalism:**

This perspective is focuses on how or if a particular element in the social system is performing well. If some part of the social system that we are talking about is working well we say that it is functional (Functional: working well, doing something good or beneficial).

For example, if someone were to say that the police do a good job catching criminals - that would be functional. In that example, an element of the social system was identified (police or law enforcement) and we were told they did something that would be good for them to do - catch criminals. That statement is from a Structural Functionalist perspective and claims that the police are doing something 'functional' (doing something that is desirable - catching criminals.).

If instead some part of the social system were doing something bad, undesirable, or harmful - we would say it is dysfunctional (dysfunctional: working poorly, doing something bad, or harmful).

For example, if we say that the police are causing crime - or harassing people in some way - that would be dysfunctional. In that example, an element of the social system was identified (police or law enforcement) and we said they were doing something bad. That statement is also from a Structural Functionalist perspective, but in this case the statement is that the police are doing something 'dysfunctional' (doing something bad or wrong). Have you ever heard of someone say that a family was 'dysfunctional'? From the Structural Functional perspective that simply means that the family or people within the family are doing something bad or wrong. A family having parents that teach their children to steal would be an example of a dysfunctional family according to a Structural Functional perspective.

- **Structural Functionalism Examples and Tips:**

Let's start out with a question. What is important here is what the question is about. That is what determines if the question represents this perspective or not.

*Question: Do colleges help prepare people for employment?*

That is a question that a Structural Functionalist would ask. The reason the question is from the Structural Functionalist perspective is because the question asks if something in the social system (colleges) are doing something good or harmful (helping prepare people for employment or not).

An example of a question that does NOT do this would be the following:

*What color do car manufacturers paint most cars?*

The reason the car color question is not a Structural Functional question is that it does not matter the color of most cars - being one color or another is not good or bad. If we would have asked a question about car safety - that would be the kind of question a Structural Functionalist would have asked.

Let's move on to a statement. A statement that identifies something in the social system and then describes it making, causing, or creating either a good or bad result/outcome would be a Structural Functional statement. For example -

*Statement: Colleges are doing a good job preparing people for employment.*

This is a good example of a statement from the Structural Functional perspective. The reason that it is a good example is that it identifies an element in the social system (colleges) and says that they do a good job preparing people for employment. Clearly preparing people for employment is a good thing.

*Statement: Colleges are doing a poor job preparing people for employment.*

This is also from the Structural Functional perspective - but instead of the colleges doing something good - they are not. The Structural Functional perspective does not care if it is a good or bad effect - the perspective is simply interested in that kind of statement (or question) about that.

## **Symbolic Interaction:**

This perspective focuses on the meaning attached to or given to something. We might ask what a behavior/action/event/object means to a person or group (or why it means what it does), or if a

behavior might make sense if we understood the meaning of something else. This perspective may also focus on the process by which the meaning has changed or come to exist.

For example, a question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective might ask what something means to someone or how something has come to have that meaning, or even if it has any meaning at all.

*Why are so many young people unafraid of illegal drugs?*

The question might sound tricky at first, but the question is really about how young people THINK about illegal drugs (unafraid) and is wondering why. Even a question more generally written could do the same thing - simply asking: How do young people feel about illegal drugs? Although the question uses the word 'feel' it really is about what they THINK about illegal drugs.

As with the other perspective, we can ask questions or make statements that are from this perspective. The key is that the Symbolic Interaction perspective is about meaning, understanding, or beliefs, either asked as a question or made into a statement.

- **Symbolic Interaction Examples and Tips:**

Let's start out with a question. Just as with the other perspective, what is important is what the question is about or what it is asking about and that is what tells you which perspective would ask that question (or make that statement).

*Question: What do homeless people think about living on the street?*

This question is from the Symbolic Interaction perspective because it is asking about what people believe or think. The question is asking about what homeless people think (what they believe) about living on the street.

The question could be asked differently - like

*"How do homeless people feel about being homeless?"*

Although the words are a little different, the idea is the same - we are trying to figure out what people think about it. Even though we use the word 'feel' - what we mean by that word is believe or think.

We also might make a statement from the Symbolic Interaction perspective as well. In this case it will be a statement about what something means to someone, what a person believes or what they think.

*Statement: Most people who are eligible to receive government assistance are embarrassed to use the assistance and refuse.*

That statement focuses on how people 'feel' (embarrassed) about government assistance. Again, it does not matter what the person thinks (or feels), simply being about thinking, beliefs, feelings, or understanding makes it from this perspective.

*Let's consider another statement: Some people who are eligible to receive government assistance feel they are entitled to more than what they are offered.*

That statement is from the Symbolic Interaction perspective too - it is about what people believe, think, or even understand.

So, the Symbolic Interaction perspective might ask questions or make a statement about what people think, feel, believe, understand, or know. It might ask about what a person believes, why they believe it, or what the consequence is of believing that. The focus of Symbolic Interaction is on meaning - hopefully these perspectives are starting to make more sense to you as you review this information.

### **Conflict:**

This perspective is focused on inequality (resources, behavior, privileges, opportunities, rights) among the people being studied. The differences could be created or imposed based on anything - age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, level of education, etc.). This perspective looks to see IF there are differences, and if there are, it tries to understand why the differences exist, and what the consequences of these differences might be for the people in the different groups.

A question from the Conflict perspective might ask: Do men and women get paid differently for the same work? This question is from the Conflict perspective because it is asking about the possibility of an inequality between two different groups of people. In this case, the question is asking about differences between men and women. The differences that Conflict perspective typically look at include things like opportunities, rights, privileges, behavior, or money. However, the conflict perspective is interested in inequality of any kind - regardless of what it is.

- **Examples and Tips:**

Let's start off with a question. Again, just as before the topic or focus of the question (and later the statement) is what determines which perspective it is from.

*Question: Is the unemployment rate the same for all races?*

This question is asking a question to see if there are or are not differences in employment (or unemployment) by race. The question could have asked about differences by gender, sexual orientation, or even age. The key thing is that the question is looking for and seeks to investigate inequality (or differences), and that makes it a question from the Conflict perspective.

*Question: Do people over 40 years old vote at a higher rate than those that are under 40 years old?*

Again, the question is focused on differences, in this case it is the rate of voting and it is asking about differences between older and younger people.

We could also make a statement that focuses on differences. Again, it is not what the facts are (there may or may not be differences) - it is that the question is about comparing one group to another.

*Statement: Hispanics are more likely to be unlawfully detained than any other race.*

This statement is from the Conflict perspective because it claims an inequality exists between Hispanics when compared to all other races.

*Statement: Caucasians get faster customer service when walking into department stores than any other race.*

*OR*

*Well-dressed people get faster customer service when walking into department stores than people who are not well-dressed.*

The first statement seems pretty easy - it claims that white people (Caucasians) experience different (quicker) customer service than other races. The other statement about being well dressed might not be so obvious - but the focus of the question is still on the inequality of how fast a person receives customer service. The first statement is about race, the second is about how people are dressed. It does not really matter how the groups of people are created (politics, hair length, tattoos, height, age, race, income, skin color....) as long as the statement (or question) is focused on inequality it will be from the Conflict perspective.

## **Perspectives Assignment**

Name:

You are a Sociologist, and you are brainstorming various research questions for your next research project. You have decided to write several questions, one from each of the three main perspectives in Sociology (Structural functional, Symbolic Interaction, and Conflict.). After each question, explain why that question would be from that particular perspective.

Research questions related to the topic of **homelessness**.

1. One question from the Structural Functional perspective:
2. Why is that question from the Structural Functional perspective? Explain:
3. One question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective:
4. Why is that question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective? Explain:
5. One question from the Conflict perspective:
6. Why is that question from the Conflict perspective? Explain:

Research questions related to the topic of **unemployment**.

7. One question from the Structural Functional perspective:
8. Why is that question from the Structural Functional perspective? Explain:

9. One question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective:

10. Why is that question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective? Explain:

11. One question from the Conflict perspective:

12. Why is that question from the Conflict perspective? Explain:

Research questions related to the topic of **shoplifting**.

13. One question from the Structural Functional perspective:

14. Why is that question from the Structural Functional perspective? Explain:

15. One question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective:

16. Why is that question from the Symbolic Interaction perspective? Explain:

17. One question from the Conflict perspective:

18. Why is that question from the Conflict perspective? Explain: