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Social Problems 1020

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**What I Learned**

I’m not going into sociology, but that fact that I took another class in this subject, tells me I must enjoy studying it. No one can fully participate in all cultures and societies throughout the world because there are too many. But sociology does a fantastic job of participating and researching all of these cultures, social problems and different societies for us, so that we can learn what would otherwise be physically impossible.

We studied three basic vantage points in this class: Conflict theory (Karl Marx), functional theory (Emile Durkheim), and symbolic interaction approach-theory (George H. Mead). Before now, I tried hard to not make up my mind on which theory would best describe my sociological outlook, because I wanted to fairly learn them all first. Some would say that already making up your mind about what you know on something you’re about to learn, is pre-conceived prejudice. With careful consideration and taking into account my love for psychology, I’ll choose answer #3. Symbolic interaction approach. My favorite explanation of this theory was from a sociology paper done from Grinnell.edu website. Symbolic interactionists: focus on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, macro-structural aspects of social systems like conflict and functionalism. A symbolic approach sees humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialization. This theory is based on the perceived perspective of humans rather than on society. In reading that definition carefully, it would seem almost too fickle to rely on the studies of subjective aspects of social life, when you could study actual objective conflict and social institutions.

Take a closer look at society though. Society is very fickle, and any and all history books would prove my point. Napoleon, French revolutions, French politics, Industrial revolution, WWI, WWII, fighting for democracy, segregated armies, freedom of religion, religious persecutions, abolished slavery, Jim Crow laws. One minute you’re signing peace treaties than next your back in wartime. Discrimination comes and goes, sometimes society learns its mistakes and sometimes society continues a perpetual cycle that it knows will not work (insanity). Conflict and functionalist try to simplify society and define problems in certain categories: political parties, race, wealth, drugs etc. When learning about our society, these categories are important, but I believe it’s more important to look even deeper at all the detailed reasons or individual’s behind the “curtain.” A lot like the human mind and how psychology tries desperately to unlock its fundamental operations, only to learn how little the surface has been scratched. This is also why some refer to symbolic interaction approach as “social psychology.”

If we were trying to help a homeless person, we could change their environment drastically, give them money, a place to live and even some stable social groups or institutions to aid them along their way. We could do all of these things and make a difference, but if that homeless person does not achieve a sense of self-worth or mental stability, than the efforts would be far less effective. The truly best thing to give that homeless person is a friend with an ear, somebody to listen and help them listen to themselves; build a strong relationship with their mind. Of course there are some people who already have the right mindset and only need a boost to truly improve themselves. My point is that the mindset and social perceptions must come first; making symbolic interaction the most accurate theory, in my opinion. It also explains why it seems so hard to help people on a large scale, or even fix a social problem.

Looking at one of the more popular and ongoing social problems of poverty and racism in L.A., many people would agree that the city has many issues which root from past discrimination against African Americans. Some people would say we can fix it with welfare, affirmative action, or universal health care etc. All of these things can make a dent, but none of them could come close to a single solution, because you’re dealing with individual minds within a group. Other sociological theories would look at the social problem and see simple black and white solutions, but as we learned in class, “we have more differences within our own groups alone, than we do from other groups as a whole.”- Dwight Adams. And I believe this is completely true, and although it sounds exasperating when trying to solve social problems, it may be the best way.