

Conflict Perspective :Marx's main concepts

The conflict theory, suggested by [Karl Marx](#), claims society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. It holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than consensus and conformity. According to conflict theory, those with [wealth and power](#) try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society will work to maximize their own benefits. Although Karl Marx is mostly known for founding what became known as socialism, his work was prevalent in numerous fields of economy, philosophy, and even history. Conflict theory is one such area in which Marx developed, and one in which his ideas are still influential to this day.

Conflict theory states that tensions and conflicts arise when resources, status, and power are unevenly distributed between groups in society and that these conflicts become the engine for social change. In this context, power can be understood as control of material resources and accumulated wealth, control of politics and the institutions that make up society, and [one's social status relative to others](#) (determined not just by class but by race, gender, sexuality, [culture](#), and religion, among other things).

The conflict theory has been used to explain a wide range of social phenomena, including wars and revolutions, wealth and [poverty](#), discrimination and domestic violence. It ascribes most of the fundamental developments in human history, such as democracy and civil rights, to [capitalistic](#) attempts to control the masses rather than to a desire for social order. The theory revolves around concepts of social inequality in the division of resources and focuses on the conflicts that exist between classes.

Many types of conflicts can be described using conflict theory. Some theorists, including Marx, believe that inherent societal conflict drives change and development in society.

Class Conflicts

Marx's conflict theory focused on the conflict between two primary classes. Each class consists of a group of people bound by mutual interests and a degree of property ownership, often supported by the state. The bourgeoisie represents the members of society who hold the majority of the [wealth](#) and means. The proletariat includes those considered [working class](#) or poor. With the rise of capitalism, Marx theorized that the [bourgeoisie](#), a minority within the population, would use their influence to oppress the proletariat, the majority class. This way of thinking is tied to a common image associated with conflict theory-based models of society; adherents to this philosophy tend to believe in a "pyramid" arrangement in which a small group of elites dictates terms and conditions to the larger portion of society, as a result of outsized control over resources and power.

Uneven distribution within society was predicted to be maintained through ideological coercion where the bourgeoisie would force acceptance of the current conditions by the proletariat. The thinking goes that the elite would set up systems of laws, traditions and other societal structures in order to further support their own dominance while preventing others from joining their ranks. Marx further believed that as the working class and poor were subjected to worsening conditions, a collective consciousness would bring inequality to light and potentially result in revolt. If conditions were subsequently adjusted to address the concerns of the proletariat, the conflict circle would eventually repeat.

Conflict Theory Assumptions

In current conflict theory, there are four primary assumptions which are helpful to understand: competition, revolution, structural inequality, and war.

Competition

Conflict theorists believe that competition is a constant and, at times, overwhelming factor in nearly every human relationship and interaction. Competition exists as a result of the scarcity of resources, including material resources like money, property, commodities, and more. Beyond material resources, individuals and groups within a society

also compete for intangible resources as well. These can include leisure time, dominance, social status, sexual partners, and many other factors as well. Conflict theorists assume that competition is the default, rather than cooperation.

Revolution

Given conflict theorists' assumption that conflict occurs between social classes, one outcome of this conflict is a revolution. The idea is that change in a power dynamic between groups does not happen as the result of adaptation. Rather, it comes about as the effect of conflict between these groups. In this way, changes to a power dynamic are often abrupt and large in scale, rather than gradual and evolutionary.

Structural Inequality

An important assumption of conflict theory is that human relationships and social structures all experience inequalities of power. In this way, some individuals and groups inherently develop more power and reward than others. Following this, those individuals and groups that benefit from a particular structure of society tend to work to maintain those structures so as to retain and enhance their power.

War

Conflict theorists tend to see war as either a unifier or as a cleanser of societies. In conflict theory, war is the result of a cumulative and growing conflict between individuals and groups and between whole societies. In the context of war, a society may become unified in some ways, but conflict still remains between multiple societies. On the other hand, war may also result in the wholesale end of society.

Marx's Views on Capitalism

Marx viewed capitalism as part of the historical progress of economic systems and believed that it was rooted in commodities, meaning things that are purchased and sold. For example, he believed that labor is a type of commodity. Because laborers have little control or power in the economic system (because they don't own factories or materials), their worth can be devalued over time. This can create an imbalance between business owners and their workers, which can lead to social conflicts. He believed these problems would eventually be fixed through a social and economic revolution.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Conflict theory focuses on the competition between groups within society over limited resources.
- Conflict theory views social and economic institutions as tools of the struggle between groups or classes, used to maintain inequality and the dominance of the ruling class.
- Marxist conflict theory sees society as divided along lines of economic class between the proletarian working class and the bourgeois ruling class.
- Later versions of conflict theory look at other dimensions of conflict among capitalist factions and between various social, religious, and other types of groups.

Origin

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848

The classical phrase above says a lot about how Marx viewed the world. Take away some old words and replace them with their modern versions, and you end up with a vision that's still shared by many people. You don't need to look farther than

the Occupy movement which protested against the richest 1%, or the anti-austerity movements prevalent in many parts of Europe. But the origins of these ideas go back a long time.

Protests during the Occupy movement led to massive friction between different social classes. Image credits: Michael Fleshman. Conflict theory originated in the work of Karl Marx, who focused on the causes and consequences of class conflict between what was then called the bourgeoisie (the owners of the means of production and the capitalists — basically the rich people) and the proletariat (the working class and the poor).

Focusing on the economic, social, and political implications of the rise of capitalism in Europe, Marx theorized that this system, premised on the existence of a powerful minority class (the bourgeoisie) and an oppressed majority class (the proletariat), created class conflict because the interests of the two were at odds and resources were unjustly distributed among them.

Within this system, an unequal social order was maintained through ideological coercion which created consensus and acceptance of the values, expectations, and conditions as determined by the bourgeoisie.

In other words, the rich tricked the poor into accepting a deal that was bad for them, using ideological tricks.

Marx theorized that the work of producing consensus was done in the “superstructure” of society, which is composed of social institutions, political structures, and culture, and what it produced a consensus for was the “base,” the economic relations of production.

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Evolution of Conflict Theory

Many social theorists have built on Marx's conflict theory to bolster it, grow it, and refine it over the years. Explaining why Marx's theory of revolution did not manifest in his lifetime, Italian scholar and activist Antonio Gramsci argued that the power of ideology was stronger than Marx had realized and that more work needed to be done to overcome cultural hegemony, or rule through common sense. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, critical theorists who were part of The Frankfurt School, focused their work on how the rise of mass culture--mass produced art, music, and media--contributed to the maintenance of cultural hegemony. More recently, C. Wright Mills drew on conflict theory to describe the rise of a tiny "power elite" composed of military, economic, and political figures who have ruled America from the mid-twentieth century.

Many others have drawn on conflict theory to develop other types of theory within the social sciences, including feminist theory, critical race theory, postmodern and postcolonial theory, queer theory, post-structural theory, and theories of globalization and world systems. So, while initially conflict theory described class conflicts specifically, it has lent itself over the years to studies of how other kinds of conflicts, like those premised on race, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, and nationality, among others, are a part of contemporary social structures, and how they affect our lives.

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Marx reasoned that as the socio-economic conditions worsened for the proletariat, they would develop a class consciousness that revealed their exploitation at the hands of the wealthy capitalist class of bourgeoisie, and then they would revolt, demanding changes to smooth the conflict. According to Marx, if the changes made to appease conflict maintained a capitalist system, then the cycle of conflict would repeat. However, if the changes made created a new system, like socialism, then peace and stability would be achieved.

Main assumptions

Conflict theorists believe that competition is a constant and, at times, an overwhelming factor in nearly every human relationship and interaction. Competition exists as a result of the scarcity of resources, including material resources like money, property, commodities, and more. Whenever there is an imbalance, a shift of power, or something that disrupts the fragile equilibrium between different social classes, a crisis can emerge.

Larger entities such as governments or companies seek to prevent or manage conflict by reallocating resources and distributing goods. Progressive taxes, minimum wages, social assistance — in conflict theory, these are all done not for the welfare of the people, but rather to reduce conflict.

Beyond material resources, individuals and groups within a society also compete for intangible resources as well. These can include leisure time, dominance, social status, sexual partners, and many other factors. Conflict theorists assume that competition is the default, rather than cooperation.

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Glossary

conflict theory:

a theory that examines society as a competition for limited resources

bourgeoisie:

those who owned the means of production (i.e. factory owners in the Industrial Revolution)

proletariat:

those who labor in the means of production (workers) and who do not possess or control capital, as the bourgeoisie does

class consciousness:

awareness that one is a proletarian, a worker, and has an understanding of solidarity in a class struggle against the bourgeoisie

false consciousness:

proletarians are unable to identify and understand their own class position and exploitation

double consciousness:

a term used to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets

power elite:

the dominant individuals and groups within the military, business world, governments, and other institutions who are at the top of the power hierarchy

Applying Conflict Theory Conflict theory and its variants are used by many sociologists today to study a wide range of social problems. Examples include:

- How today's global capitalism creates a global system of power and inequality.
- How words play a role in reproducing and justifying conflict.
- The causes and consequences of the gender pay gap between men and women.



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