Theoretical Perspectives

**Structural-Functionalism perspective** is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.

- The two basic components of this paradigm are **social structure**, or a relatively stable pattern of social behavior, and **social function**, which refers to consequences of a social pattern for the operation of society.
  
  Key figures in the development of this paradigm include Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton.

Robert Merton further applied and developed the thinking of these early social scientists. Merton differentiated between

- **manifest functions**, or consequences of social structure both recognized and intended, and **Manifest functions are intended. Functions are actions that have positive consequences**

- **latent functions**, which are unrecognized and unintended consequences of social structure. **Latent functions are unintended**

- There may be **undesirable effects on the operation of society**, or **social dysfunctions. Dysfunctions are actions that have negative consequences**

**Conflict perspective** is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and social change. Social differences, rather than social integration, are the focus using this paradigm. Educational achievement is discussed to illustrate the unequal distribution of power and privilege.

Critical evaluation of this paradigm raises concern that social unity is ignored, and that in focusing on change, objectivity may be lost.

- Society is held together by who has power at a moment in time
  - Power allows some to dominate others
  - Dominance leads to conflict
  - Conflict and change are inevitable
  - Conflict holds society together as new alliances are formed and others fail

*Most sociologists who favor the conflict paradigm attempt not only to understand society but also to reduce social inequality.* - Key figures in this tradition include Karl Marx, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Wright Mills.
The Symbolic Interaction Perspective is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. People are seen as interacting in terms of shared symbols and meanings. In critically analyzing this view it must be stressed that the focus is on how individuals personally experience society. This approach does not allow us to generalize findings to establish broad general patterns.

This paradigm was greatly influenced by the work of Max Weber, a German sociologist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the United States, during the twentieth century, the work of George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman (dramaturgical analysis), and George Homans and Peter Blau (social-exchange analysis) was instrumental in the development of this paradigm.

- Individuals construct the nature of their social world through social interaction
  - Social life is possible only because humans can communicate through symbols
  - All human communications take place through the perception and interpretation of symbols
  - How people define situations is important
  - There is a general consensus on how situations are defined
  - We do not respond directly to reality but to the symbolic meanings we attach to the real world