Sociology is everywhere; it’s even in the movies! In order to recognize it, one must first learn what to look for, and then it will be evident that sociology is actually in every single aspect of life. Sociology is not limited to the world’s major problems, such as poverty or war. These horrifying realities are definitely included, but sociology is even seen within daily activities and day-to-day interactions. A child’s relationship with her mother can even be looked at from a sociological perspective.

Today there are three sociological perspectives that sociologists recognize. These three perspectives are known as symbolic interactionism, conflict theory, and functionalism. They highlight both the macro level, which is the “examination of large-scale patterns of society”; and the micro level, which “focus on social interaction—what people do when they are in one another’s presence” (Henslin, 2011, p. 19). To give a more in depth analysis of how sociology is seen, I watched three different movies that demonstrate these individual perspectives, including an animated movie. Yes, that’s right! Even children are learning how to view society as they watch their favorite animated movies. The movies hold not only a manifest learning, known as the “intended learning”, which teaches the child a moral; but also a latent learning, the “unintended learning”, which shows the child how the world views characters in their movie and why (Henslin, 2011, p. 16).

*Aladdin* is the story of a poor, young man who has become a thief along with his monkey companion and best friend, Abu, in order to have enough food to eat. His life is changed when he meets Princess Jasmine, a young woman who ran away from the palace walls in hope of being free and escaping a forced marriage. The couple meet, and it is immediately evident that they are falling for each other. This relationship is put on pause, however, when Jafar, the Sultan’s advisor, interferes. Jafar is plotting to obtain a lamp containing a magic Genie so he can rule
Agrabah, but in order to do this he needs Aladdin. Aladdin, however, ends up in possession of the lamp and uses his wishes to win the heart of Princess Jasmine by becoming a Prince himself. The movie continues with Jafar doing everything he can to sabotage Aladdin’s efforts, but Aladdin fights on. At the end, Aladdin is permitted to marry Princess Jasmine, even though he is not a Prince; Jafar is defeated, becoming a slave to the same lamp he so greedily tried to obtain; Genie is set free, with a whole new set of friends; and everyone is happy.

Aladdin is an excellent example of all three sociological perspectives due to its multiple aspects. However, I chose Aladdin to illustrate symbolic interactionism because it is the perfect example of how people respond to symbols, and how symbols essentially create a social structure, by “guiding our behavior” (Henslin, 2011, p. 99). Symbolic interactionism is “a theoretical perspective in which society is viewed as composed of symbols that people use to establish meaning, develop their views of the world, and communicate with one another” (Henslin, 2011, p. 12). Aladdin is known as a street rat because of his appearance, not his character. In fact, Aladdin’s character is so great that he is known as the “diamond in the rough” (Musker, 1992). Unfortunately, his character is not a symbol that others interpret in order to best understand how they should treat Aladdin. In fact, most people treat him very poorly due to the symbols they do see. Women shun him, guards chase him, and people sneer at him.

Aladdin has no wealth, therefore he has no symbols of wealth. In Agrabah, symbols of wealth include nice clothing, shoes, jewels, horses, camels, and much more. Aladdin didn’t even have shoes to protect his feet, and there are obvious patches on his clothing. He also had no place to live or call his own. His only option was abandoned buildings to sleep in at night. These are symbols of poverty. People who had never met Aladdin, referred to him as a street rat. A scene in the movie shows a pompous Prince on his way to meet Princess Jasmine to seek her hand in
marriage. On the way, he nearly runs over two playing children with his horse. Instead of reacting with concern for nearly killing the children, the prince takes out his whip preparing to hurt them for disturbing his path. Fortunately, Aladdin sees this and stops him from whipping the children by placing his arm in the way. The prince sees Aladdin’s clothes and appearance, summing him up to be worthless. He tells Aladdin that he is a “worthless street rat”, and actually says only his fleas will mourn him when he dies (Musker, 1992). This is an example of symbolic interactionism because it shows how Aladdin’s appearance invoked this particular response from the Prince. If the Prince had seen Aladdin in similar clothes as he was, he would have reacted with respect and possibly even an apology.

Another example of symbolic interactionism is when Princess Jasmine runs away from the palace. She does not want to be recognized as a Princess, so she covers her nice clothing with a plain brown cover up, and she wears a hood to cover the jewelry on her head. She is accepted as an equal by the people of Agrabah, and even Aladdin is unable to tell she is a Princess. When the guards find Princess Jasmine dressed in her disguised clothing, they immediately treat her poorly. They make fun of her, and deem her as “street mouse” (Musker, 1992). It is not until she removes her hood and identifies herself as the Princess that the guards correct their behavior, bow down to her, and immediately apologize. They recognized her symbols, and responded to them accordingly.

Likewise, when Aladdin uses one wish to be a Prince, the Genie changes his clothes to a much wealthier look, providing him shoes, a hat similar to the Sultan’s headwear, and fancy attire. The Genie transforms Abu from a monkey to an elephant for Prince Aladdin to ride on top of. The elephant being used as transportation immediately provides a symbol of great wealth, but if that wasn’t enough, the Genie creates a parade of gold, peacocks, jewels, dancing girls, men
with spinning swords, and much more. These symbols immediately present him as not only a Prince, but a Prince of extreme wealth. The people of Agrabah react to him completely different at the sign of his new symbols. The girls are suddenly attracted to him, men want to shake his hand, and the guards bow down to him. He is immediately welcomed into the Sultan’s palace, and embraced by the Sultan himself purely due to the symbols presented that establish him as a Prince. If Aladdin had attempted to enter the palace with his usual appearance, he would have been chased out of the palace and possibly arrested. The only explanation, for the obviously different reactions from these people, is the change of symbols.

Symbolic interactionism is in every relationship. We learn the ways we are supposed to act around people based on their symbols, and based upon what is culturally accepted within our society. For instance, the Princess held more prestige and was treated with respect in Aladdin based upon her symbols. This is similar to how the President is treated today. Aladdin’s status, however, was very low and his symbols showed that. This invoked a negative response towards Aladdin, and is similar to how a homeless person is treated because of his symbols.

*Remember the Titans* is based on the true story of T.C. Williams High School, a Virginian school that is undergoing racial integration after years of experiencing segregation within their community. The movie focuses on the football team primarily, and it shows the effects the forced integration had on the coaches of the team, as well as the individual players, and the families of those players. Football teams generally have a large mission in front of them just worrying about practicing plays and winning. However, this team must unify against all odds in addition to winning. As the team accomplishes both feats, the community is positively affected by the team’s example of the way things should be, resulting in a better and stronger community with much less prejudice. This is a story of triumph over ignorance.
Remember the Titans is one of my favorite movies because it is an inspiring story about defeating prejudice. I chose this movie to illustrate conflict theory because within this movie the battle between the races for limited positions, or scarce resources, is clear. Conflict theory is “a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of groups that are competing for scarce resources” (Henslin, 2011, p. 18). At the beginning of the film, it is evident that there are two separate groups, blacks against whites, fighting over positions on the team. There is conflict over who will be head coach of the football team, and there is conflict over who will be allowed to play certain positions on the team. The Caucasian coach, Bill Yoast, has been the head coach up until the integration of the school. All of the football players, as well, on the team are Caucasian up until this point. When the school is integrated, however, there is tension over how the roles will change now that African Americans are allowed

on the team.

Until the integration, Caucasians and African Americans in Virginia went to school and played football separately. Caucasians were what Karl Marx would consider the Bourgeoisie, the have’s (Henslin, 2011, p. 18) of this time, while African Americans would be the Proletariats, the have not’s (Henslin, 2011, p. 18). The underlying reason racism was so strong at this time was hundreds of years of cultural diffusion, which contained learned racism, strong ethnocentric behavior, no cultural relativism, and pure ignorance. The time of slaves was over, but the effects still resonated. This background of racism infused the separation of the groups even more. The Caucasians of the team felt entitled to their positions, and they believed the African Americans didn’t deserve to play on a team with them. In fact, there a number of times in the film when Caucasian players state their refusal to play because of their new teammates. However, they cannot afford the luxury of not playing, which would result in being disqualified for college
football, so they are forced to compete with the African American players. For African Americans, on the other hand, this was the time of opportunity. They desperately wanted these limited positions to show Caucasians of the world that they are equal. This resulted in conflict.

Coach Hermene Boone, an African American, feels the pressure of not only obtaining the only position as head coach, but he must also do better than what would ever be expected of any Caucasian in this position. If he fails, or more specifically loses one game, the school board, consisting of all Caucasians, would have him fired, and they would feel justified in their racism against African Americans believing they cannot perform as well as a Caucasian could. As Coach Boone is hired as head coach, replacing Bill Yoast, the Caucasian football players become even more fearful of losing their positions while the African Americans become more confident about the ability to gain theirs. Both groups were unaware that Coach Boone would choose players solely based on skill, and not on a race. This concept was totally new to both groups at the time.

Conflict theory is evident throughout history. There are examples of it between all types of relationships, including the following: the rich and the poor, between races, sexes, religions; etc. It can even be seen in the competition of football players for the lead positions on the team, such as *Remember the Titans*.

*For Richer or Poorer* is the story of a wealthy married couple whose relationship is ruined after years of materialism and selfishness. In the midst of deciding to divorce, they find out their accountant has framed them, and are forced to hide away from the IRS. They end up in an Amish community and experience culture shock as it is a complete change from their way of life. The couple pretend to be distant Amish cousins coming to live with one of the families. The two leave the lap of luxury, and they are worked harder than they ever have been before. They
are denied common conveniences, such as indoor plumbing, telephones, and cars. It is here that they fall back in love (Baker, 1997).

*For Richer or Poorer* is an example of functionalism in its purest form. Functionalism is “a theoretical framework in which society is viewed as composed of various parts, each with a function that, when fulfilled, contributes to society’s equilibrium” (Henslin, 2011, p. 15). The Amish community is a separate society. A society is, by definition, “people who share a culture and a territory” (Henslin, 2011, p. 2). They are best classified as a subculture, “a world within a world” (Henslin, 2011, p. 54). The Amish work together to ensure their cultural values are maintained, and their society is kept whole. Everyone has a job to do in order to keep their society functional. The Elders in the film are responsible for approving or disapproving major decisions that affect their society, the farmers are responsible for producing food that contributes to the nourishment of the society, the women must tend to their men and children, so that the men are healthy enough to complete their jobs, and the children can grow up to follow in their footsteps. Everyone within the community performs a function that contributes to society’s equilibrium (Henslin, 2011, p. 15).

In the film, when Brad and Caroline Sexton enter the Amish community, they are immediately taught their roles in order to be productive members of society. Caroline is required to cook, clean, and sew. Brad must break a horse, and tend to the farm. In return, the family purchases the food Caroline and Brad eat, provide a roof over their heads, and treat them as part of the family. When everyone is participating in the proper ways, they are being functional. Even when the role may seem small, it is not. A wife cooking and cleaning for her husband allows her husband to have the strength to complete the farm work that results in crops for their family to eat, and other members of society to purchase and nourish their bodies.
As Brad and Caroline enter the commune, they take on the behavior of the Amish family and conform to their values. They live as the Amish live, and therefore maintain a functional society. But there are times in the film when they attempt change that most of the Amish consider deviant behavior. However, Emile Durkheim believed “deviance is functional for society” (Henslin, 2011, p. 168). An example of this behavior is when Caroline wants to add color to the wardrobes. To the elders of the commune, this is especially outrageous because black is the only modest color. However, to most of the women, they are intrigued by what color may bring. Caroline gains support, first by the community and then by the elders, to add colors to the wardrobe, changing the way things are done within the commune. “Deviance promotes social change. Boundary violations that gain enough support become new, acceptable behaviors” (Henslin, 2011, p. 168).

Functionalism can be seen in every successful society. The Sons of Anarchy can even been seen as an example of functionalism. They are a counterculture, “a group whose values, beliefs, norms, and related behaviors place its members in opposition to the broader culture” (Henslin, 2011, p. 54). However, they are still a separate society that maintains its equilibrium by each member completing a separate function. When the members fulfill their part, the result is a functional club. In this way, the Sons of Anarchy can be related to the Amish in For Richer or Poorer.

These three sociological perspectives are exhibited everywhere. They are in books, movies, video games, and most importantly, in daily life. They are apparent in the past, present, and even can be guaranteed as part of the future. Sociology is not just something to learn about, but forget later because it holds no significance to life. Sociology is life.
References


